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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

WE'RE ALL KILLERS

by BRETT HALLIDAY

He knew his way around kills and killers, but this time Mike Shayne knew he was in perhaps the greatest peril of his life. For the one man who could ruin him was saying, "You got away with a lot, Shayne. But this time it's murder. And Murder means the chair!"

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MIKE SHAYNE

is at his Hardest-Hitting best in

WE'RE ALL KILLERS

A NEW Short Novel by

BRETT HALLIDAY

MARTIN FARROW held out his hat to Mike Shayne. "Look at this," he said. "There's a hole in the crown, isn't there? Now what do you think made that hole?"

"Just offhand I'd say it was a bullet hole," Mike Shayne told him.

The man with him snorted. "I suppose you can afford to be all that calm about it," Farrow said. "I can't. You be sure I can't. It's a bullet hole, all right, and what's more to the point it's in my hat. It was made less than twenty-four hours ago."

If it hadn't actually been a matter of life and death — Shayne knew a bullet hole when he saw one — the big private detective would have grinned at the vehemence with which the little man spoke.

It was almost seven-thirty in the evening and the two of them stood on the concrete parking apron close to where the tourist trip boat *Miami Belle* was already loading passengers for its regularly scheduled evening scenic cruise of Biscayne Bay. Men and women were buying tickets and streaming up the gangplank while a five-piece dance band tuned up on the lower of the two decks.

"You're sure you want to make this cruise?" the redhead asked.

"Sure? Of course I'm sure. I need time to tell you about this, don't I?

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Ringed by his foes, Mike Shayne heard the words that could spell his doom. "You've got away with a lot, Shayne, but this time it's murder. Murder means the chair for you."

And with somebody shooting at me, I can't just sit still some place where I'm a target, can I?"

"Why not in your own home?" Shayne smiled at himself. He was already picking up the little man's habit of making a question out of every statement. "Surely that would be safe."

"No, it wouldn't," Martin Farrow said indignantly. "It most certainly would not. My home would be the most dangerous place in the world, Mr. Shayne, don't you see? No, of course you don't, but you will. No, this boat is safe, right out on the middle of Biscayne Bay. Nobody can get near us to shoot, can they? I mean not without being on the boat too — and then they couldn't escape, could they?"

"I guess they couldn't at that," Shayne assented. "All right, Mr. Farrow. Let's go aboard and you can tell me all about it. I think you may have had a good idea at that."

"Don't I always?" Farrow said.

Twenty minutes later the two men sat side by side on one of the upper deck benches toward the stern of the cruise boat. It was a midweek summer night and the crowd was light. Most of those who had come for the two-hour trip were clustered in the bow where they could take advantage of every bit of cooling breeze generated by the boat.

A flaming sunset blazed off to the west as the craft idled down toward the drawbridge in the Broad Causeway between Miami Beach and the Florida mainland.

"Now," Shayne said, "suppose you tell me what this is all about. You phoned me at my office and said to meet you at the landing. You wanted to hire me to protect you. That's absolutely all I know except that you showed me a bullet hole in your hat."

"It is?" Farrow said. "I did?"

He grabbed for the hat in question, pulled it off his head and looked at the hole. "Oh, yes. Of course. I did, didn't I? Well, what proof do you want more than that?"

Shayne began to wonder if he'd run afoul of a real nut this time. Sometimes they showed up in the private detective business as in any other. He decided that, since he had to stay aboard the *Miami Belle* for the cruise anyway, he might as well go ahead and hear the man out.

"First of all," the detective said, "who do you think is trying to kill you?"

"Think?" the fussy little man snapped. "I don't think. I know. My wife, of course. Didn't I tell you? My wife."

"You didn't tell me until right now. What does she want to kill you for? That is ,if she really does?" He thought to himself that so far this whole case had been nothing but question marks. It was time for some answers.

"For my money, of course," Farrow said. "I'm a very rich man — a very, very rich man. She's my

only heir. Once I'm out of the picture she gets it all."

"Everybody has some sort of relatives," Shayne said. "Don't you even have distant cousins?"

"Everybody but me has relatives," Farrow snapped. "I'm a self-made man. I was left on the steps of an orphanage wrapped up in old newspapers. Not even a blanket. You see? No relatives. I've got the money, though."

He took out a beautiful snakeskin wallet and extracted a piece of paper which he handed to the detective. It was a cashier's check made out to Michael Shayne in the amount of ten thousand dollars.

"That's your retainer," Farrow said. "Plenty more where that came from. Now will you protect my life?"

"Sure I will," Shayne said. "At least I'll do my level best. Now why does your wife want to kill you? Don't you treat her well? Most wives of rich men just wait until they die."

"Ellen is impatient," Farrow said. "She's half my age, really less. She's hot-blooded. I don't keep her happy — well, romantically. You know what I mean? She wants it all, right now. She runs around with men, too," he added almost wistfully.

"That makes it simple," Shayne said. "Go away some place incognito. Maybe Brazil or Europe. While you're gone let your attorneys handle a divorce for you. Then she won't have a thing to gain by your death."

"I thought of that," Farrow said. "It won't work. I, uh, have a girl friend myself. Someone who really understands me. Somehow Ellen found out. If there was a divorce, she'd skin me alive. I'd have nothing left."

As he spoke the *Miami Belle* started through the open causeway drawbridge. Lines of cars were backed up in both directions waiting for the vessel to pass.

"She's extravagant, too," Farrow said. He pointed up at the line of cars waiting on the bridge "Just a week ago she bought a yellow foreign sportster like that one up there. Hers has a gold cigarette lighter and jewels set in the steering wheel. It cost fifty thousand dollars. Fifty thousand. Do you see?"

"From all you say you can afford it," Shayne said. "When was that

hole shot in your hat, and what makes you think she had it done?"

"Just this morning," Farrow said, "and I don't think she had it done. I think she did it herself. The woman's a crack shot with a rifle or pistol. We live in a new condominium on Indian Creek. I was down on the boat landing this morning watching the water, something I like to do. I had this hat pulled down over my ears because it was windy. All of a sudden I felt like somebody tried to twist my head off. It was awful. When I looked there were the holes in the hat. It can't have missed my head by a sixteenth of an inch."

The big boat was sliding through the draw, and a waiter took a tray of beer and sandwiches to a couple sitting together several seats behind Shayne and Farrow. As he returned with the empty tray the boat lurched and he took a quick step to the side which put him just behind the two men for an instant.

Then he lurched again and fell full length. The empty metal tray made a strident clatter on the deck.

"What's the matter with that fool?" Farrow said. "Is he drunk?"

Shayne took one look. Then he was out of his seat faster than Farrow had ever seen a man move before. The big man literally snatched his client out of his chair and yanked him into the enclosed observation cabin.

"What's the matter?" yelled the startled Farrow.

"Shut up," Shayne said. "That waiter isn't drunk. I think he's dead. Somebody just shot him."

II

THE *Miami Belle* put back to its dock immediately after the fatal shooting of the bar waiter. The man was dead with a small caliber "varmint rifle" bullet through his spine and heart. He probably never knew he'd been hit. It was all over so fast most of the cruise passengers were still wondering why their holiday excursion had been cut short when they saw the Miami Beach police waiting on the dock.

The law had turned out in force. There was an ambulance, a dozen uniformed men and almost as many dark-suited officers of the homicide detective division.

There was also, Mike Shayne noted without pleasure, the trim, nattily dressed figure of Beach Police Chief Peter Painter. He and Shayne saw each other at the same moment, and the chief immediately ran up the gangplank, followed by a couple of his detective lieutenants. He made a beeline for the big redhead.

"I might have known it," the dapper little chief said. "Whenever there's a murder in my town, there's Mike Shayne as big as life. What are you, some kind of buzzard that spots dead bodies from a mile up and homes in on them?"

"You know better than that, Petey," Shayne said. "I was just trying to get a breath of fresh air on this

tub. If you kept your town a little better policed, I wouldn't have to fall over a corpse every time I set foot on the Beach."

The little chief swelled up like an enraged turkey gobbler.

"You're going too far," Painter said. "I ought to run you in on general principles anyhow. Are you wearing a gun?"

"If I am you know I have a permit for it. Besides, I'm told this fellow was shot with a rifle. I'll swear I haven't taken to packing one of those around town."

Painter said, "I'll still bet when I get to the bottom of this I'll find you mixed up in it some place."

"No you won't, chief," Martin Farrow said suddenly. "Not unless you want to accuse me of murder also. You wouldn't, would you? Mr. Shayne was my guest on this ride and we were talking business the whole time. You see, don't you?"

Painter looked at the little man with Shayne for the first time and recognized him. He went red. "I'm sorry, Mr. Farrow. I didn't recognize you, sir. No, of course. If you vouch for Mike Shayne, that settles it."

"I vouch for him, don't you see?" Farrow said.

"That's right, Petey," Shayne said. "He vouches for me, so now all of a sudden I'm white as snow again. We're leaving." He couldn't resist adding, "Don't you see?"

Peter Painter saw.

Shayne and Farrow walked quickly through the police lines and out to the parking lot. Shayne was so busy trying to keep between his client and any possible danger that he didn't see the TV photographer until the man had had a chance to get a shot of them. He hoped his face had been turned away, but couldn't be sure.

"We'll take my car," he told Farrow. "Yours can be picked up later, and whoever is after you knows it by sight for sure. There's just a chance they might not know mine."

"Why do you say that?" Farrow asked. "Of course they don't know your car. I haven't told anyone I called you, have I? So why do you say a thing like that?"

"Well," Shayne said, as he raised the hood of his car to see any signs of tampering; there weren't any, "you just remember I'm the detective, the pro. I've got my reasons."

"What reasons then?"

"Try this one for size, Mr. Farrow. When that waiter was shot he was directly in back of me, not you. If the man behind the rifle was really good—"

"The woman," Farrow interrupted. "My wife is a good shot. Didn't I show you her car on that bridge? Didn't I?"

"I don't know and neither do you," Shayne said. "Anyway, if he or she knew his business that shot just might have been meant for me, not you."

"What do you mean? I don't know my wife's car when I see it?

It cost enough so I'll never forget it."

"At the time you pointed out a car you said was the same make and model. Neither of us could see who was in it. The mayor might have been driving. Don't jump to conclusions."

"Oh."

"Get in the car, and stop trying to do my job for me," the big detective said.

"Where are we going?"

"Right now I'm taking you to my place, where I can keep an eye on you and know you're okay. I believe now that somebody wants you dead. The next step is to figure out a way to prove who it is."

"Oh, good thinking," Farrow said. "That's just the conclusion I'd have come to myself in another couple of minutes. I'm sure I would. Wouldn't I?"

"I'm sure you would have," Shayne said. Then he devoted himself to getting the car out of the parking lot and threading the southbound traffic on Highway A1A. At this time of the early evening it wasn't easy.

Mike Shayne lived in an apartment hotel in downtown Miami facing on the river itself. He felt a lot safer when he got Farrow seated in one of his big, comfortable easy chairs and mixed him a drink. Shayne himself drank brandy with a famous label right out of the glass and chased it with cold water from the tap. He took a hearty swallow and felt its easy warmth under his belt.

"Now, Mr. Farrow," he said, "I suppose you realize you've actually hired me for two jobs and not one. You want me to protect your life, and I agree with you right now that it could very well be in danger. That should be relatively easy, because I'll stay with you all the time. The other job won't be quite as easy. That is to prove who it is who's trying to kill you."

"You keep saying you're a detective, don't you?" Farrow said. "What do you want now? For me to tell you your business?"

Shayne fought down a moment of irritation. He could see that this man wasn't going to be one of his all-time favorite clients.

"Of course I don't. What I am asking for is your complete cooperation. I've got to have the truth, and all of the truth from you at all times. For instance, who is this girl friend of yours that you mentioned? Where is she, and how does she fit into the picture?"

"You ask a lot of questions," Farrow remarked.

Shayne took another drink of brandy. He needed it.

"Her name is Eileen Moore," the little man said. "She's beautiful — dark, not blonde like Ellen. She's closer to my own age and she understands me. She lives in the condominium building next to ours on Indian Creek. I pay the rent, of course."

"Have you ever said anything to her about marriage? That is, anything your wife could learn about?"

"Of course I want to marry Eileen. Why wouldn't I? But how could Ellen know?"

Shayne thought, "You might get their names mixed up when you're talking to them," but he didn't say it aloud.

He said instead: "I think I'd like a talk with this Eileen. Also, you said you had evidence your wife was running around with men. If you do, I'd better see it."

"I have letters," Farrow said. "They're in my wall safe at home. I'll give you the key and the combination if you want and you can go over there yourself and get them."

"Not by myself," Shayne said. "I want you to open your own safe. Besides, I don't want to let you out of my sight."

III

IT WAS ALMOST midnight before Mike Shayne left his car with the parking attendant at the luxurious condominium apartment building where Martin Farrow made his home. The man recognized Farrow and greeted him cordially.

"Are you sure your wife won't be home?" Shayne asked as they rode up in the elevator. "I'd like a chance to talk to her sometime soon."

"She's not home. This is the night she has tickets to the theater in Coconut Grove. That's miles

away and she'll stop at a night club on the way anyhow. Why do you want to meet her, anyway?"

"Because it would help me figure the type of person it is I'm dealing with," Shayne said. "I suppose tomorrow will do just as well though."

Farrow used his house key to let them into the beautifully furnished apartment. It took only one look for Shayne to realize the man must surely be as wealthy as he claimed. A couple of pieces of carved Chinese imperial jade in the shape of ceremonial lions on the foyer table must have been worth several thousand dollars each.

The apartment covered as much square footage as a good-sized house. The living room into which they stepped from the foyer was at least forty by twenty-five feet, and Shayne estimated the cost of the

deep-piled carpeting as at least a hundred dollars a yard. Glass doors led out from the west side of the room to a wide, iron-railed balcony looking over the waters of Indian Creek.

Farrow didn't give the detective much time to admire the furnishings. He led the way quickly to a side wall of the big room and took down an original oil painting hanging there in a heavy gilt frame. Back of the painting a modern combination safe had been set into the wall.

The little man fumbled with the combination dial for a moment and then stepped back.

"It's no use," he said. "I'm exhausted. Too much has happened today. You'll have to do it for me, don't you see?"

He held out his hands and Shayne could see that they actually were shaking with fatigue.

"I'll call the numbers," Farrow said. "You turn the dials. Otherwise I'll mess it all up, won't I?"

Shayne followed his client's instructions, and in a short while the tumblers of the lock moved softly into place and the door swung open soundlessly on well-oiled hinges. Inside the big redhead saw two ornate, velvet-covered jewel cases and a brief case and bundles of tied papers. There was also a long metal case like the safety deposit drawer in a bank vault.

Farrow pointed to the metal box. "That's the one. That's where I keep my papers that are really important. Lift it out and put it over on the table there."

He took a key off the ring in his pocket and handed it to Mike Shayne. "That's the one. Go ahead and unlock the box. The letters I want you to see the in a big white envelope with two crosses marked on the outside in red crayon. It's in there some place. I'm sure it is."

"Okay," Mike Shayne said. He almost whistled when he opened the lid of the box. It was at least half full of United States currency in bills of large denomination. Close to one hundred thousand dollars. The bills were in no particular order. Some were held in packs by ordinary rubber bands. The rest were loose and mixed in with sealed envelopes, legal papers and just plain trivia. The whole thing looked like the nest of a millionaire packrat.

The detective started piling the contents in neat stacks on the table as he looked for the marked envelope. When he didn't find it at first he lifted out handsful of loose paper money and shuffled the bills together like playing cards.

"Don't mind that stuff," Farrow said. "I've got plenty of money. It's my wife's letters I want, and her lovers'. I know they're in there. I put them in the envelope myself. Can't you find it?"

"I can find it," Shayne said.

But he didn't.

The whole weight of the building, maybe the weight of the island that

was Miami Beach, came down on his head all at once. In that awful flash of an instant he knew he'd been hit with a lead-loaded blackjack, and he knew surprise that a man like Farrow would use such a weapon. It had to be Farrow.

Mike Shayne tried to hold onto the table with both hands and stiffen his legs against collapse, but it wasn't any use. The blow had been sudden, unexpected, and terribly hard. Then it was repeated. His eyes blurred and his knees gave way.

He was very dimly conscious of being struck a third time, and then all of the lights went out and he nosedived into the incredibly thick and soft pile of expensive carpet.

How long he lay there he couldn't tell. Once he almost roused. A shock . . . a noise . . . something loud and violent. But the sap had done its work too well. He fell into utter dark oblivion again.

IV

INFINITELY SLOWLY, Mike Shayne began to swim upward out of the dark vortex of unconsciousness.

At first it was just awareness of pain that filled and twisted and tore at body and mind. Then it was awareness of a self that felt pain, and then that the self was named Michael Shayne and was a private detective on a job.

Then, with the sudden, tearing impact of lightning on a summer night, it was awareness that Michael Shayne was in terrible danger.

He stopped being just an observer of pain and became an actor in a drama upon which his life depended.

Bit by bit he fought to regain control of his senses and his muscles. He became first a thinking being, and then a man able to move and feel and coordinate his body.

Finally he opened his eyes.

He was lying in the same spot with his face half buried in the fibers of that same incredible carpet and looking into her face across a distance of three or four feet. He could see papers on the carpet and a tangle of green currency in hundred- and thousand-dollar bills. He saw the leg of the table.

He was looking at her across a distance of only three or four feet.

Her? She wasn't supposed to be there at all.

She had long blonde hair that streamed over her oval, classically beautiful face. He could see one white shoulder, bare except for the strap of an evening gown. Her grey eyes were open, but they weren't returning his look. They didn't see him lying there, and they would never again see anything at all. Not anything.

The grey eyes had the awful, flat blank look that told Mike Shayne the woman was dead.

Off in the distance he heard a bell ringing. It had to the doorbell

to this multi-million-dollar house of horror.

Dazed as he was, Mike Shayne realized what the ringing bell meant. Somebody was trying to get into the apartment. He knew instinctively that that someone either was the police or would call them as soon as the door opened. In this town the police meant Peter Painter.

Mike Shayne knew a frame-up when he woke in the middle of one. Somehow he struggled to a sitting position. He could see now that the woman on the floor had been shot at least once. The rug under her breasts was soaked and caked with blood.

One of her hands gripped a heavy bronze statuette of a naked Greek god, gripped it like a club.

The bell had stopped ringing, but now there was a sound of banging and pounding against the door. Shayne tried to get up and failed.

He reached for his gun and found the holster empty. He knew he wouldn't shoot at the police anyway. Most of them were his personal friends. Still, his dazed mind told him the gun should not have been missing. There wasn't time to look for it.

He tried again and this time managed to get to his feet. Except for himself and the corpse there was nobody else in the room. The crashing sounds at the door got louder. Shayne knew he hadn't much time left.

This time he managed to stagger across the room, open one of the sliding glass doors and get out onto the balcony. He moved along it to his right until he was out of sight from the living room. There was a small, jalousied window at his back, and he looked through it into a darkened kitchen.

When he looked over the railing, it was to a drop of ten stories. He reeled and went dizzy from weakness and grabbed the iron railing with both hands and held on until the dizziness had passed.

He heard the apartment door crash open at last and the voices of several men inside the living room. He heard their yells when they spotted the body.

There was only one possible thing that Mike Shayne could do and he did it.

There were identical balconies with identical iron railings fronting all the apartments in this building. All the railings were alike, built for strength to stand even against hurricane winds.

Only a man as strong and as finely coordinated as Mike Shayne could have done what he did next, and even in his case it was an effort made possible only by pure desperation. He put one foot on top of the iron railing, determinedly keeping himself from looking down, and then reached up with both arms; stood erect on the top of the railing with one powerful, fluid motion; caught the bottom of the rail immediately

above and swung himself up, hand over hand.

With one titanic effort he swung himself over the iron rail and onto the safe sanctuary of the balcony above.

It wasn't an instant too soon.

Even as he lay there, panting and exhausted, he heard the door slide open from the room he'd just left below. At least two men stepped out on the balcony under him, and he heard Peter Painter's voice say, "I'd hoped we might trap him here, but I guess not."

Another voice which he recognized as belonging to Detective Lieutenant McGinnis said: "He must have come to and got out of the apartment before we got here. That guy's a real wonder. Anyway, his car's still in the parking garage downstairs. He can't get very far on foot."

"You don't know him," Painter yelled back. "Not like I do. Phone headquarters, Mac. I want an APB on Mike Shayne. Bring him in any way they have to, and I want it right now. I've got that big shamus now. He won't wiggle out of this one, I can promise you."

"I don't know, chief," McGinnis said. "I've known Mike Shayne for near as long as you have. I'll admit he's pulled some fast ones, sure. But murder and robbery of his own client, that isn't like Mike."

"Are you trying to tell me my business?" Painter's voice crackled.

"You know better than that."

"Then can it," Painter said. "Just get out the APB like I said."

Feet scraped on the balcony and then the sliding glass door must have been closed behind them, because Shayne heard no more. He lay perfectly still right where he was and let the strength slowly flood back into his own muscles.

Then he heard the sliding door of the apartment at his own back move in its slot. The big man braced himself for possible violent action.

"Don't get ready to twist my neck," a voice behind him said. "You'd better come on inside. If you stay there somebody from the building across the way will look out and spot you."

The voice was a woman's, low and throaty, with a sexy undertone. Shayne didn't argue. He got up and moved into the apartment living room.

"Sit down and rest," she said. "I'll fix you a drink."

She was a tall woman, though still inches shorter than the big detective. Her lustrous black hair fell shoulder length in smooth, rich curls, and the shoulders were white and soft. Her body, outlined by a clinging one-piece sheath dress of dark blue wool, was mature and bursting out in magnificent curves. Her violet-blue eyes were keen and alert. She might have been anywhere from forty to fifty years of age.

She mixed him a strong drink of rum and coke and matched it with one for herself.

Shayne drank gratefully.

"Are you always this hospitable to visitors off the balcony?" he asked.

"You're the first visitor I've had from the balcony," she said with a low, musical laugh. "Besides I'm consumed with curiosity. I saw you swing yourself up from the apartment below. Then I listened from my own window and heard Chief Painter talking about you. You must be Mike Shayne?"

"You know Petey?"

"Of course I know Petey Painter. I've met him several times. I've heard of you, too. Who hasn't in this town?"

Shayne finished his drink and set the glass down. The rum felt warm and good under his belt. He was almost his own self again. "Then why didn't you just go downstairs and turn me in? It would have been easy."

"Not easy for me," she said frankly. "I've got a particular interest in what goes on downstairs. I can say a very strong interest indeed, but there are reasons why I just can't run down and ask."

"Oh," he said. He looked at her again and began to suspect who she was. "He told me you lived in the next building."

"That's one of Marty's little foibles," she said. "He doesn't like to lie, but somehow he never tells quite the whole truth. Being just above his own apartment is more convenient when he wants to come see me late at night. Besides, he made a lousy joke about it. He says this is just one more way I'm one-up on Ellen."

"That isn't much of a joke," Shayne said. "That would make you Eileen?"

"Eileen Moore," she nodded. "Just the girl next door. By the way, I thought Petey mentioned

murder. You didn't kill dear old Marty, did you, Mike?"

"I didn't kill anybody," Shayne said. "Petey just thinks I did. Or maybe I ought to say hopes I did. Besides, as far as I know good old Marty is still alive. I believe he was the one who sapped me down there. When I was out of the world somebody took my gun and shot a blonde woman. My guess is Marty's now a widower."

"As far as I'm concerned that would be just ginger peachy, wouldn't it? Open the aisle to the altar and all that sort of jazz. Do you think I did it, Mike?"

He reached over and took her hand and looked at it in the light of the one lamp. His fingers pressed hard in several spots.

"What's this all about?" she asked. "I mean you're quite a man, Mike, and I'm a hot-blooded girl, but is this the time and place?"

He made to drop her hand, but she held on to his and her fingers made little caressing movements.

"That hand," he said, "tells me you didn't shoot Ellen, at least not with my gun. You fire a forty-five with a soft hand like that and you d bruise the hell out of it. Not to mention a sprained wrist."

She laughed again and leaned over to kiss him lightly on the mouth. "I'll remember that if I ever decide to shoot somebody. At least I'm glad I'm not a suspect to you. Maybe we can really play hot hands some time, too. Marty doesn't exactly leave a girl weak and exhausted, you know."

She drew back. "By the way, where is Marty?"

"I don't know," Shayne said. "It's a good thing for him I don't. He didn't exactly win any personal popularity contest with me when he half caved in my head and set me up for this frame. You understand that?"

"I'm not a monster," she said. "Of course I understand how you feel. But I still think there must be a mistake. Marty isn't a violent man. He certainly isn't a killer. Who should know that better than I? Did you actually see him hit you?"

"No, but the last time I saw him he was the only one in the room with me."

"Couldn't somebody else have come in and hit him first and then you? That is, somebody who could move quietly and quickly enough?"

Shayne remembered the deep pile of the carpet. Anyone could walk there without making a sound.

"It's possible," he admitted grudgingly. "I don't think so, though. When you're in the business as long as I am you get real hard to sneak up on."

"Maybe. But somebody managed it this time. It didn't have to be Marty. I don't think it was."

"Look here," Shayne said. "I know you want to marry Farrow. Sure. I appreciate your helping me, too. That doesn't mean I'll take a rap for murder, though."

"I'm not asking you to do that." Her face, close to his, was a picture of candor and honesty. "I'm going to get you out of this building in a few minutes. I'll help you any way I can. All I ask is you check out any other possibilities for the murder and frame-up before you go after Marty. If he really did something like that I won't cover up for him. I'll help you prove who did it."

Shayne put up a big hand and tugged at his ear lobe. "There's a lot of money in it if you marry Farrow."

"Sure there is," she said. "Go on and say it. If I didn't like money I wouldn't be his kept woman and let him paw me whenever he wants. That's true. But think one step further. Would I marry a man who's already killed one wife? What would keep him from trying again when he got tired of me?"

"I didn't think of that," Shayne said.

"Well, I did. I wouldn't dare go to sleep with him for fear I'd never wake up again. I have to think of those things. If he killed Ellen, Mike, you can have him." Eileen Moore tried a smile.

"Who else could have done it? Can you give me any lead at all?" Shayne asked.

"Sure I can," she said. "Ellen had lovers. I don't know who they were, but I can find out from Martin and let you know. At least wait until you check them out."

"How can you get me out of here?" Shayne asked.

"Easily enough," Eileen said. "This building and the next have one owner. Martin Farrow. There's a closed service bridge crossing the alley between and connecting the two top floors. I have the key and come and go that way a lot, so I don't chance meeting Ellen in the elevator. I'll go that way with you and pick up my car in the parking level. The police are likely watching only one building. Besides, they won't be looking for a man and a woman together in a car. It'll be easy enough, if I help you."

"And then what?"

"Then I'll drive you any place you want and drop you off, and come back here myself. By morning even somebody as stupid as Chief Painter will have heard about me and come looking for me. If he doesn't I'll manage to contact Martin some way or other. I'll find out everything I can, and pass it on to you."

He hesitated and tugged at his ear. For Mike Shayne that was a sign of deep thought

"You've got to believe me, Mike. I'll play square with you. Sure, I want to marry Martin Farrow, but not if he's already done murder. Money can't buy that for him. I want the truth in this case almost as much as you do."

"Okay," he said finally. "I'll buy that. For now anyway. But not for too long."

V

MIKE SHAYNE had Eileen Moore drive him back across the Venetian Causeway to the downtown Miami area and drop him just off the Boulevard in the northeast twenties. From there it was an easy walk to the high-rise building where the redhead's long-time friend, feature writer Tim Rourke of the *News*, had his apartment.

He didn't tell Eileen he was going to Rourke's place, of course, just that he'd phone her later in the day.

He was also careful to use the service entrance and elevator to the building. He didn't want anyone who might recognize his big frame to see him enter the building. It was almost dawn when he managed to rouse the reporter. Tim Rourke let him in at once.

"I slept with one ear open," the gangling, lanky writer told Shayne. "I figured you'd show up here if Petey failed to grab you off on the way."

"So you heard about that."

"Everybody who's been awake to listen to the news has heard about it, you big bonehead. You'll be front page in the morning editions, too. What in the devil have you been up to?"

"Up to? Nothing but up to my ears in trouble," Shayne said. He went on to give Tim Rourke a quick run-down of his experiences during the night.

The lanky writer put back his head and roared with laughter. He was still laughing when he got out a bottle of Shayne's favorite brandy, tumblers and a pitcher of ice water from the electric refrigerator.

"My God," he said, "I swear I never heard the equal of that one. Mike Shayne bamboozled and sapped by the likes of Martin Farrow."

"Stop ho-ho-ing. You aren't Santa Claus."

"I can't help it," Rourke protested. "It's like hearing an old gray wolf was trapped and knocked out by a field mouse."

"Okay," Shayne said. "Have your damned laugh. When you get all through tell me what the late news has to say about this."

"I'll do better than that," Rourke said. "You can have it straight from the horse's mouth. When I stopped laughing the first time I called Will Gentry. He says Petey really thinks he can nail your hide to the barn door this trip. From the case he's got, even Will's worried maybe he can make it stick."

"Okay," Shayne said impatiently, "spell it out. Let's hear the worst."

"It's bad. It's really bad, Mike. It seems about one o'clock this morning the switchboard operator at Farrow's condominium noticed the light flashing. His phone was off the hook. She tried to call him, but all she could hear was thumping sounds and what seemed to be moans.

"Naturally the girl got the wind up. She called the building mana-

ger. He has a pass key but he wasn't in his apartment. Gone out for the evening, I guess. Anyway, then she called the police. Farrow's name is big enough over there to bring them humping. By pure bad luck Petey was in the area and responded to the radio call himself.

"When pounding on the door got them no place, they broke it open. They found Mrs. Farrow in the living room, dead as a mackerel. She'd been shot by a forty-five after hitting her attacker over the head with a bit of bric-a-brac."

"A bronze Hermes," Shayne said.

"My God," Rourke said. "Anyway, she must have fetched him a good clout. There was more blood on the rug a ways off. It's been positively identified as yours. They're still searching the building for you."

"What about Martin Farrow?" Shayne said. "What about that double-crossing little fink?"

"Holds your horses. I'm just getting to Marty. They found him tied to a chair in the master bedroom. He was gagged and on the floor where the chair had toppled after he managed to knock the phone out of its cradle."

"So as soon as they cut him loose he begins to put the whammy on me?"

"That's it, Mike. Exactly. He says he brought you here to his place to get some papers, but you took the combination of his safe away from him and opened it. When you saw it was full of money you went crazy. You tied him up and went back to the safe. Then he heard his wife come in and there was a fight and a shot. A long while later he managed to knock the phone over. He says there's a hundred thousand in cash missing from the safe."

"Don't look at me, Tim. I haven't got it."

"Of course you haven't, but Petey says he has your fingerprints all over the safe."

"Sure he has," Shayne said. "Old Marty-the-smarty asked me to open it for him. He says his hands were shaking and I believed him. What did Will Gentry say?"

"He says you've got to be innocent or raving crazy. He says nobody but an idiot would pull such a stupid job right out in the open with a witness. He also says you don't have to shoot a woman who attacks you to protect yourself. He says if you really took that dough the wife would have run off with you and cut the old boy's throat herself."

"Will Gentry's a smart man," Shayne said.

Tim Rourke said: "You're right, and he knows you. This deal smells frame-up from ten miles off. On the other hand a jury just possibly might not see it that way. Petey's got enough evidence to hang a dozen men, and he knows it. Your prints, your gun, money gone, the doorman sees you go in and nobody sees you leave. On top of that the

only witness is old Farrow, and he's howling for your blood."

"If I get my hands on him, I'll guarantee he's going to do some howling."

"That won't help."

"I know it." Shayne drank his brandy and refused a proffered refill. "I know that old devil framed me for murder. He admitted he wanted his wife dead, so he set me up for the world's all-time champion patsy. When I had my prints all over the safe he slugged me. Then he waited until she came in and shot her with my gun, planted the evidence, tied himself up — anybody who tries can manage that easy enough — knocked the phone over and let events take their course. Damn it, he thought of everything."

"Not quite everything," Rourke said.

Shayne thought for a moment. Then: "You're right. He didn't figure I'd come to and get out of there before the law busted in the door. If I'd still been on the floor for Petey to scoop up he'd have me for sure. As it is I'm on the loose. I've got leg room and I've got time. He knows I know it was a frame, and he's bound to be scared of me. A scared man can make mistakes. As long as I'm on the loose I can threaten him and maybe prove my innocence."

"It won't be easy," Rourke said. "Frankly, I don't see how you can hope to prove anything at all. The police already have all the evidence there is and all of it points straight to you. Still, it's the only chance you're going to get."

"There's two things running my way," Shayne said. "I'm just beginning to realize what they are. I'll have to play them for all they're worth in the little time I've got."

"What two things?" Tim Rourke poured himself another drink, then said: "I never drink before breakfast, but maybe I could call this still after dinner."

Shayne ignored that. "In the first place a man in Farrow's spot is bound to run scared. The surer it is that he's guilty the worse scared he has to be. Frightened men make mistakes. Guilty men call attention to their guilt. I don't think this one will be any exception."

"So we wait for him to hang himself?"

"Not just wait," Shayne said. "I think maybe we better help him along with it, give him a little push in the right direction. For instance, you go interview him for the *News* this morning. Ask him how he feels knowing a real killer like me is on the loose after he blew the whistle on me. You know how to do it. Worry him as much as you can."

"Can do," Tim Rourke said. "Will do. Didn't you mention a second point in your favor?"

"I did. It just came to me that there's one piece of evidence the police can't very well twist around to make it point to me. Instead this one can maybe turn the whole case around and clear me."

"Good," the lank reporter said. "What's that?"

"A corpse," Shayne said. "The body of that poor devil of a waiter on the *Miami Belle*. Somebody shot him last night and whoever it was wasn't trying to fill a game limit on waiters. He was trying for Farrow, or possibly me. Whichever way, I couldn't possibly have fired that shot. And whoever did fire it could have killed Mrs. Farrow."

"Farrow couldn't have fired it, either," Tim Rourke pointed out in a reasonable tone. "That shooting couldn't finger either of you for the killer."

"Of course not, but it fingers a Mr. X. If and when I can locate him I can put a lot more pieces of this particular puzzle into place. I've got to locate X."

"Maybe you already have," Tim Rourke said. "Only it could have been Mrs. X. Mrs. Ellen X. Farrow, to be more precise. Farrow seemed to think it was her, that he'd spotted her car."

"If I could prove it was her," Shayne said, "at least that would give Farrow a good motive for killing her. A motive that I didn't have. It would make a reasonable case that he might have shot her. My lawyer would have something to work with, anyway."

"He wouldn't have much of a case," Rourke said. "Look, Mike, you know I'm your friend, but I wouldn't be much of a friend if I didn't level with you. It wouldn't erase the fact your gun was used — your prints are there. Money is missing. All the rest of the evidence that somebody's gone to so much trouble to hang around your neck. Petey would just laugh at it and say maybe Farrow did want to kill her, but you sure beat him to it. It's a hundred to one any jury that didn't have me on it would agree with him."

"I know," Shayne said. "Now I've got to find a place to hole up. Sooner or later even Will Gentry will have to look for me here. You call Lucy Hamilton and tell her I'm all right and I'll be in touch."

"Have one for the road."

"I won't fight you on that," said the redhead, reaching for the bottle.

VI

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE left Tim Rourke's apartment he knew that he had to get off the streets, but fast.

His friend Will Gentry wouldn't be too eager to pick him up, nor would the men of the Miami force. On the other hand, an APB from the Beach couldn't just be filed away and forgotten, even when the fugitive was a personal friend of Gentry. If he was seen they'd have to pick him up. He couldn't chance that.

There were places he knew of where he'd be safe enough with friends, but none of them were close to Rourke's place. The worst of that was Mike Shayne's car was in the Miami Beach police holding pound. He couldn't get at it. He didn't dare take a bus or a cab either, or just stroll around the downtown section.

The big redhead was a man who'd stand out in any crowd. He'd be spotted and remembered, especially since the papers and the morning TV news would be spreading his picture into every home and place of business in South Florida within a very few minutes.

He twisted through the narrow streets between Biscayne Boulevard and the Bay itself. It was going to be tough getting to a safe hideaway.

The man coming out of the service entrance of the large new apartment building didn't see the big detective. Shayne didn't see him either. They closed rapidly on a full collision course, met in the middle of the sidewalk, and almost knocked each other down.

"Sorry, friend," Shayne said. He didn't want any trouble at that point.

The other man was almost as big as the redhead. He wore a white jacket and a black scowl. He was tired and irritated and his head and feet both ached. In his left hand he held a wire basket full of empty milk bottles he was taking back to the delivery truck parked at the curb a little bit down the block.

"You lousy bum," he yelled. "Why'nt you look where you're going? I oughta knock your dirty block off."

"I said I was sorry."

The milkman made one of his worst mistakes when he decided to press the point. He was big and tough and mad at the world and probably thought he could get away with it. Whatever the reason, he took a right-handed swing at the big man who'd almost knocked him down.

The next thing he knew he was flat on his back in the croton bushes next to the building.

The milkman bounced up fast. That was a tribute to the fact that Mike Shayne had deliberately pulled his punch. He'd hoped to just discourage the man and get along on his way.

It didn't work. The guy in the white jacket was big and tough and fancied himself as a rough-and-tumble expert. He was sore at the world

anyway, and in a raging fury at the big redhead. He left his wire basket on the grass where it had fallen, lowered his chin against a bull neck and came in swinging with both hands.

Shayne sidestepped the crazy rush and jolted the big fellow erect with a hard left to the side of the head. When the brawler's hands came up, Shayne kicked him in the stomach. Then he followed up with a crashing left and right to the jaw that put the man down and out for a long count.

Shayne stepped back and looked at his handiwork. He couldn't just leave the man there for somebody to spot from a window or a passing car and report to the police. That would bring the hunt down on him for sure.

He considered pulling the body into the bushes or back inside the apartment house door and then discarded that idea also. The fellow might be out for more than twenty minutes. The detective couldn't accept the idea of a fast hue and cry.

Then he saw the milk truck a couple of doors down the block.

He picked up the recumbent man and carried him to his own truck. He took his own dark suit jacket off and put it in the cab, and then put on the driver's white uniform jacket. He found cord and tied and gagged the man and hid him behind crates of milk and orange juice cartons.

Best of all, he found a snub-nosed thirty-eight caliber revolver and a half box of shells in the glove compartment. The driver must have put it there in case of a holdup attempt.

Shayne pocketed the gun. It wasn't a type of weapon he preferred, but with killers on the loose and his own gun in Chief Painter's possession he felt better now that he was armed himself.

A moment later he pulled the milk truck away from the curb. Ignoring the rest of the driver's route, he headed back for Biscayne Boulevard and a part of the northwest section where he'd be more at home.

Within two blocks of his reaching the boulevard a police patrol car passed him without either of the uniformed men inside giving him a glance. Shayne knew one of the two, and grinned as the car pulled smoothly ahead of him into the early morning traffic.

A little before he came to Northeast 79th Street Shayne turned west off the boulevard into a section of small old homes, rooming houses and small stores.

He left the truck, with the driver still tied up in the back, in the parking lot of a ramshackle paint-and-body repair shop. The owner was a thief, and Shayne hoped he'd be plenty embarrassed when the missing truck and driver were discovered and the police began going over his place with a fine tooth comb.

He put his own jacket back on and walked away through the early morning light. The streets were still almost deserted. Besides, the resi-

dents of this section tended strictly to their own business.

Shayne found the place he was looking for within five minutes. It was an ancient frame building, a small and frowsy beer bar on the ground floor and living quarters above. He climbed the rickety wooden outside stairs to the second floor door and pounded with a big fist.

After a while a sleepy woman's voice said: "Get outa here, you bum. We ain't open yet. Go find some weeds and shake it off."

"I want to talk to Bill," Shayne said.

"Well, he ain't here. Bill's doing thirty days for D and D," the voice said. "Now are you gonna get going, or do I call the cops. I mean it. Get going. Blow."

Shayne laughed. "You wouldn't really blow the whistle on an old friend, would you, Katie?"

A corner of the dirty curtain covering the glass pane in the door flipped back for an instant. Then he could hear chains rattling and a bolt being drawn back.

"Well, for Chri'ssake," the voice said cordially. "Whyn't you say it was you, Mike? You know there's always a place at the table in this house."

"That's good," Shayne said. "Hurry up and get that door open, Katie, before a John Law spots me."

She finished opening up and let him into the kitchen. It was a mess with dirty pots and dishes all over the sink and a plate of stale bread

and dried-up cold cuts from the night before on the oilcloth-covered table.

"So it's the law," she said almost happily. "I always knew you were too good a Charlie to keep walking with the squares. What you been up to?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, Katie," Shayne said, "but this time it's a frame."

"Sure," she said, trying to brush a tangle of red hair into some sort of shape with the flat of her hand. "Sure it's a frame. It's always a frame. What I mean is, a frame for what?"

Shayne got himself a beer out of the refrigerator. "It's a frame for murder."

"Oh, oh," she said. "That's somethin' else again. Now I believe the frame part. You ain't the sort for murder, Mike. Not you. Scrag some character who was trying to do

you in, mebbe, but murder ain't your style."

"That's a real compliment," Shayne said. "No, I didn't kill anybody. Not that maybe I won't if I catch up with the joker who set up the frame. Right now though the law thinks I did. That's just as bad."

"Will Gentry never thinks so. He's got more sense," she said. "Go ahead. Snorkle down that beer, Mike. In a minute I'll fix some grits and eggs."

Katie Schmidt had been a dazzler at sixteen and a beauty at thirty-five. Even in her mid-fifties she was a handsome woman with a full-blown, sensual figure. The blue eyes were bloodshot most of the time now, and the hair showed the erosion of too many dye jobs, but she could still turn men's heads when she walked down the street or presided at the bar she owned.

She bustled about the kitchen, somehow working a miracle of creation from the existing chaos, until Shayne was busy with biscuits, grits. fried eggs and a big pot of boiled coffee laced with fiery Jamaican rum.

Somewhere along the line a clinging red dress had replaced the rumpled housecoat she'd been wearing and she'd found time to apply make-up and really brush her hair.

"Now," she said, seating herself across the table from the detective, "what can I do to help? I'm sorry Bill ain't here, but you know he never was good for much nohow. Whatever he could do fer you, I can do better."

"I know that," Shayne said, "and I do appreciate it. Right now I need a place to lie up where the cops won't look. This could be it. Even more than that I need some sort of transportation. Right now my own wheels are held by Petey Painter's boys on the Beach, and this is too big a town to try walking around."

"No sooner said than done," she said. "You know you can stay here as long as you want. There's no man living I'd rather have put his shoes under my bed, if it comes to that." She smiled at the big redhead.

"I can handle the wheels, too. Bill's out at the drunks' hotel this county calls a stockade, but his taxicab sure ain't. You can take that anywhere you want. Should make a pretty good cover for you, too."

"It will," Shayne said. "People are so used to seeing cabs around no one ever looks at the driver. It'll be perfect for what I need."

She went and got him the keys. Then they sat and talked until it was time for her to go down and open the bar for early and jittery neighborhood customers.

Shayne lay down on the bed and slept until about three o'clock in the afternoon. He hadn't had any rest the night before, and figured he'd need every bit of strength and alertness for the next day or so.

He didn't dare sleep too long, though. There were a lot of things to be done. When he woke he heat-

ed more coffee, laced it with rum, and then washed and shaved with Bill Schmidt's razor.

He needed to go out, so he decided to change his image by leaving the dark suit jacket behind. He pulled out his shirt tails to hide the thirty-eight. Bill's clothes were too small for the big man, but he found an old rain slicker that fitted after a fashion.

The day was overcast, with showers coming in off the Everglades, so he could get away with wearing it. A battered straw hat of the sort tourists bring back from a weekend in Nassau, Bahamas, hid most of his tell-tale red hair, and sunglasses completed as much disguise as he dared to try.

The first thing he did was to drive to a pay phone and call his office. Lucy Hamilton answered as he'd expected she would. He knew the office phone might be tapped, so he gave her a code word prearranged in advance between them for use in emergencies.

It signaled her to go down to the little restaurant around the corner from his Flagler Street office. Shayne moved to another pay phone and called her there.

"Michael," she said, "I've been plenty worried. They're really after you this time. Will says he can't cover you if you're picked up."

"I know that," Shayne said, "but don't worry. I'm not about to be picked up. Don't forget this is my home town. I know every hidey-hole in it. That's not what bothers me. Did Tim get to talk to you?"

"He told me all you'd had a chance to tell him," she said. "It sounds bad for you. I'm honestly worried."

"You don't have to be, Angel," Shayne said, and hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. "I didn't do it, so the case is all a mess of lies. Thei revidence is a house of cards, and I'm bound to find a way to blow it down."

"Of course you will, Michael," she said. "Now tell me how I can help. What can I do?"

"Mostly just keep your chin up, Angel," he said. "There's one place you can help, though. Somehow or other manage to get a hold of Eileen Moore. Don't tell her anything about me except that I have to talk to her again. She's to tell you where I can contact her later on and set up a meet. I'll call you again after it gets dark tonight. Also see what you can find out around town about the late Mrs. Farrow. Get everything you can, gossip included."

"Will do," she said. "Take care of yourself, you big lug."

VII

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE hung up the phone after talking to Lucy Hamilton he called Tim Rourke at his office. He didn't give his name, of course, but the writer recognized his voice at once.

"I have to see you, big man,"

Rourke said. "Are you able to move around town?"

"Free as the wind," Shayne said. "Go out the front door of the Hilo Bar across the street from the *News* in exactly one-half hour from now and hail a cab. Leave the rest to me. It had better be important, though."

"It will be," Rourke said. "I mean it is. Where do I tell the cabby to go?"

"Tell him to go to hell, for all I care," Shayne said.

He picked up Tim Rourke himself, of course, using Bill Schmidt's cab. It was true enough that people don't really look at cab drivers any more than they do at garbage men or letter carriers. They were three blocks away from the bar before Rourke realized who was at the wheel.

"My God," he said, "I was so busy trying to see where we were going that I never really got around to looking at you."

"You see what you want to see," Shayne said, without turning his head. "As long as I stay in this seat I think I could hack Petey himself home from the station. He'd never look at me as long as I didn't try to hit him for a bigger tip."

He drove Tim Rourke north to a vacant lot off the Bay, where he could park the cab out of sight from the street behind a big advertising billboard.

"Now let's have it," he said. "What's so important?"

"It's Martin Farrow," Rourke said. "The little man is really spooked for fair."

"I'm glad to hear it," Shayne said. "I don't suppose it could be bad conscience doing it."

"Not that simple," Tim Rourke said. "Of course I was just interviewing him as a reporter, and I couldn't come right out and ask him the questions I wanted. I couldn't even let him know I was a friend of yours."

"You make your living by reading between the lines," Mike Shayne told him.

"That's right. And what I get between the lines is that he's scared half to death. He's so frightened his hands shake all the time and his mouth quivers when it isn't busy talking. His skin's positively grey. If that guy had a bad heart, I wouldn't bet on his living two days, the state he's in."

"I hope it's me he's scared of," Shayne said. "I'll make sure he has good reason to be."

"I don't know for sure," Rourke said, "but I don't think it's you that has him in the blue funk. Maybe partly that he's afraid of you. I'm sure he wishes Petey had you locked up, but I think there's a lot more to it than that somehow. Of course, he wasn't going to blurt it out to a reporter."

"Make an educated guess."

"If I had to do that it would be the same one I'm sure you've already thought of. I think the one

who has him panicked is the same one who killed that waiter on the *Miami Belle*. I wouldn't be surprised a bit if there had been another try to knock him off since last night. It's just a hunch, of course."

"I can find out," Shayne said.

He was thinking of Eileen Moore. She'd know what had taken place if anyone on earth did besides Martin Farrow himself. If he could reach her that evening, he'd get her to tell him. A plan of action was already beginning to form in the back of his mind.

"I hope you can," Rourke said. "Still I don't exactly see how it helps your case. Actually, if X knocks off Farrow, it means you can't ever get a confession from him that would clear you of the murder of Ellen Farrow."

"I've thought of that myself," Shayne said. "On the other hand, just the fact of X being around gives me something I can use as a lever on Farrow. The sooner I get at it the better too. I better hit him before he has a chance to recover from the shock. He must have been sure it was Ellen trying to kill him. So he gets rid of her and frames me, and that should have put him in the clear — all downhill to home from there on in.

"Only I slip out of the trap. Now he doesn't know if I'm trying to kill him or somebody else, and if it's somebody else then who is it? Oh, lovely, lovely. That little man is going to sweat his heart out before this is over. I'm going to take you back part way now, Tim, and drop you off where you can get another cab back to the *News*.

"When you get there I want you to do one more thing for me. Call Farrow back on the phone. Tell him I've been in touch with you. That's right. Forget the reporter role this time. Make it clear you're talking for Mike Shayne. Tell him I want to make a deal. I'll sell him X if he clears me of killing Ellen."

"That will be a neat trick," Tim Roarke said, "considering that you don't actually have any idea who the hell X is."

"Farrow doesn't know that," Shayne said. "For a fact neither does X. Nor do you. By the time you get the message across I may actually have found out who it is."

"Suppose he won't deal?" Tim Rourke asked.

"Right now I don't care what he thinks he wants to do. I just want him to know I'm offering that deal. The faster you can contact him the better. Now remember, whatever he says you tell him I'll contact him later to set up a meet for this deal. At the least that'll give him one more thing to worry about."

"If I get anything hot, where will you be?" Rourke asked.

"How do I know?" Shayne said. "Don't you call me. I'll call you."

The big redhead started the motor of the cab. He peered cautiously up and down the street before leaving.

VIII

MIKE SHAYNE went back to Katie Schmidt's place to wait for dark. She was busy at the bar, but there was bread and cold corned beef and more hot coffee and rum. He made a meal and thought things over while he ate.

The very possible reappearance of the rifleman he called simply X in the case pleased Shayne more than it disturbed him. It posed a new threat to Martin Farrow, if it was true, and the more frightened Farrow became, the better chance Shayne would have to force or cajole a confession out of him.

It also gave Shayne a chance to do what he'd told Tim Rourke to say he could do — that is, pin down the real identity of X, and deliver him to justice in return for being cleared of the Farrow murder.

It also put the big man on the horns of another dilemma. Suppose he found out who X was, and then Farrow still refused to trade? It was perfectly possible. Farrow wasn't going to confess to killing his own wife if he could possibly squirm out of it. What good would it do Shayne to turn X over to the law then? He'd just be freeing Farrow of his terror and quite possibly signing his own death warrant.

"This case," Shayne told himself, "is just about as clear and simple as twelve pounds of cooked spaghetti and two quarts of sauce poured over a barrel of live monkeys."

The thought made him grin, but it didn't actually solve any of his problems. Time was running out for the big man, and he knew it. If he was going to solve this case at all it would have to be before either Farrow was killed or the police got their hands on him.

Before leaving Katie's place he called Lucy Hamilton again.

"What can you tell me?" he asked.

"I'm afraid it isn't a lot," she said. "For the first thing, I couldn't get much on Ellen Farrow. She was at the theater last night. The play was over before eleven o'clock.

"As far as any lover she may have had, it must have been a really discreet affair. Gossip just about draws a blank. There were rumors, without any man's name being used, but they were just rumors. Nothing more. Nothing definite. That's all I could get in one afternoon."

"That's all right, Angel," Shayne asid. "If you couldn't get it, it just wasn't there. What about a meet with Eileen Moore?"

"That part isn't good, either. I had an awful time even getting to speak to her on the phone. She's been with Mr. Farrow practically the whole time. I finally got her on the phone and she came down and met me at a drug store on Collins Avenue close to the building where they live."

"Good girl, Angel."

"Oh, Michael, you know I'd do anything at all to help you. I think I just about had to threaten to come

up and force my way into the place to get her to come out. She said there were police guards there, but I said I didn't care. The police weren't after me for anything, and I'd come on up anyway. Then she agreed to come down and meet me."

"That was good thinking," Shayne said. "I know she wouldn't want you barging in there."

"Because it would tip off Farrow and the police that she'd helped you last night?"

"Yes," he said. "That would be bad enough, but maybe she had other reasons too. What did she say about meeting me?"

"That's the bad part. She said no. Absolutely not tonight or for at least a couple of days. There was no way at all she could get away from Farrow for long enough to shake off the cops and meet you. I tried to change her mind, but she wouldn't give an inch on that."

"How far did you go to persuade her?"

"Almost as far as a threat. I said you were fighting for your life and needed help, that I'd never forgive her if she let you down."

"Now think carefully, Angel. How did she react to that?"

"She got mad, Michael. Not scared. Not flustered or anything. Just mad, so mad her face turned white and she absolutely gritted her teeth. She did manage to choke back whatever it was she was going to blurt out first, but she didn't fool me one little bit. One woman can

read another where a man can't. She was just plain, cold, killing mad."

"I'm glad she didn't try killing you." Shayne tried to speak as calmly as possible. "Did she have a message for me at all about a meet later on?"

"Yes," Lucy Hamilton said. "Right at the end when she'd managed to get control of herself again she said for you not to be a fool and do anything rash. She said to stay hidden out wherever you were. She was still sure Ellen's lover was involved, but it would be a day or so before she could get any details from Martin. She said he was so shaken up right now he wasn't quite rational even.

"Then she made me give her my phone number. She said that as soon as she could get free to meet you, she'd call me and I could let you know."

"What did you say to that, Angel?"

"I said I couldn't get word to you because I didn't know where you were. I had to wait for you to call me."

"Exactly right," Shayne said. "Now you go home and wait. Don't let anybody in but Tim or me, and don't go out. Even if somebody claims to be giving you a message from me, don't believe it or pay any attention. If I have any messages for you I'll call you myself."

"Are you afraid I'll get a message from Eileen Moore?"

"I don't really know. While you're waiting, though, you might try to find out more about the late Mrs. Farrow. I'd particularly like to know her movements between the times when she left the theatre and was killed."

"It will take some time," Lucy said, "but I think I can get you that. The doorman at the Grove Theater remembers putting her in a cab. Sooner or later I'll locate the cabbie."

"Fine," Shayne said. "When you do call him at home. Promise him any amount of cash to give you his story. One more thing . . . "

Shayne hesitated. He was thinking hard. His very life might depend upon what he was going to say next. The idea had just come to him, and he hadn't had time to really think it out yet, but some instinct born of long years as a top-ranking private detective told him to go ahead.

"What is it?" Lucy said. "Are you still there, Michael?"

"I'm still here, Angel. Listen to this carefully. At ten o'clock tonight, or as soon afterward as you can make it, call Eileen Moore on the phone. Tell her who you are and then tell her that her apartment has been searched. As soon as you know she heard that hang up. Don't answer your phone if she tries to call you back.

"If you can't get her on the phone, manage to get in or get the message to her. If you have to, tell Petey you have new information. Let him think you'll blow the whistle on me."

"I don't understand," Lucy said, "but I'll get that message to Eileen somehow. I promise. Be careful, Michael."

"I'm not good," Shayne said, "so I'm always careful. It's a habit by now." He hung up the phone.

The plan that Mike Shayne had decided to put into effect represented one of his most dangerous gambles. His life, quite literally, depended upon his being able to carry it off. He stood a good chance of being killed while trying, and if he failed the frame-up against him was almost certain to stand him before a hostile jury. Juries were notoriously biased against men who killed women without the strongest possible provocation, and that was what the law would prove that he had done.

The worst of it was that this was not one single gamble but two, and

that success in only one phase of the plan would leave him little better off than if he'd failed in both. He had to win all the way or not at all. It would call for every ounce of intelligence, daring, skill and ability which he'd acquired in long years at his trade.

The two goals he aimed at were mutually complementary, but each one posed separate and distinct problems.

First of all, he had to establish the identity of the mysterious X, who had tried to kill Martin Farrow on more than one occasion. If Farrow had been correct in assuming that his wife Ellen was X, then that fact itself would be of real significance.

Shayne did not think it was true, however. He was reasonably sure there had been another attack on Martin after Ellen was already dead. How else account for the little man's continued panic at a time when all his schemes seemed to have succeeded?

If Shayne was right in his assumption that Ellen had not been X, he had a pretty good educated guess as to who that killer actually was. He was going to check out his hunch and find out for sure.

The time element here was tremendously important. To save his own life, Shayne had to expose X before that person managed to kill Martin Farrow. He had to protect the little man who had so treacherously tried to frame him into the electric chair. The irony would have made it funny if it hadn't been a matter of literal life or death.

If he was right in his guess as to X's identity, there wasn't a minute to lose. Until Shayne acted, Martin Farrow's life hung by the thinnest of threads.

After that was done, Shayne still had much the hardest part of his job to do. He had to prove that he himself had been framed in that matter of Ellen's killing. He still wasn't sure just how he could possibly do that. The evidence against him was overwhelming. He had little confidence that he could get Martin Farrow to confess, particularly after X was taken out of the picture. Then Shayne's one big lever to move the little millionaire would have been removed. He would have removed it himself with his own hands and brains.

Mike Shayne was a big man in more than physical size. He would not give up. He'd play the grim game with death out to the uttermost instant with the same determination with which he began it.

But it looked like a losing game. That was for sure.

IX

MIKE SHAYNE waited until well after dark before he drove his borrowed cab back to Miami Beach. He even picked up a passenger and took him across the causeway to Collins Avenue. It gave the big red-

head a wry satisfaction to pocket the fare and the meager tip.

The detective stopped at a Collins Avenue store and bought a four-pound box of expensive chocolates. He had them done up in the shop's gaudiest and most impressive gift wrapping, and then propped up the package on the front seat of the cab where anyone looking in could see it.

From there he drove on down Collins Avenue to the condominium where Eileen Moore lived. As he passed the building he noticed a cluster of uniformed and plainclothes Beach police watching the entrances. Chief Painter was taking no chances in guarding his rich and frightened widower.

Shayne drove on to the adjoining building, the one through which he'd made his escape the night before. and drove down the ramp to the basement level parking garage maintained for apartment owners and their guests. As he'd expected there was only a single attendant on duty here.

The detective let the man stop him. "Delivery for the eighth floor, Mac," he said, and jerked his thumb at the big package on the seat beside him.

The man just gave it a casual glance.

"Service elevator over there," he said, and pointed.

"Thanks," Shayne said. Then: "Look, Mac, I ain't had time for dinner yet. Mind if I leave the cab here a little while so I can go to the restaurant down the block and get some chow? I don't like leaving it on the street untended. My company's got spotters."

The man laughed. "I know how it is, buddy. Go ahead. It's no skin off my nose what you do."

Shayne parked and took the service elevator up to the eighth floor, just in case the man noticed the indicator lights. Then he walked up the fire stairs to the top floor.

As he'd expected, the "flying bridge" between the two buildings was unlocked and unguarded. Then he walked down the fire stairs of the adjoining building to the floor where Eileen Moore lived.

When he cracked open the door to the fire stairs and looked down the long hall Shayne saw that Painter had taken the trouble to post a uniformed officer at the door of Eileen's apartment for a guard. What was worse the man, although he had his back turned, had a familiar look. They probably knew each other.

Shayne looked at his wrist watch. It was nine-forty o'clock. He had to be inside that apartment before ten.

He walked back up the stairs and got out on the floor above Eileen's. Then he punched the elevator button and brought the cage up from the lobby. He got in and pushed the button for the floor below.

When the doors opened, he punched the second floor button and stepped out into the hallway, hold-

ing the big box of candy high in his arms so his face was partly hidden.

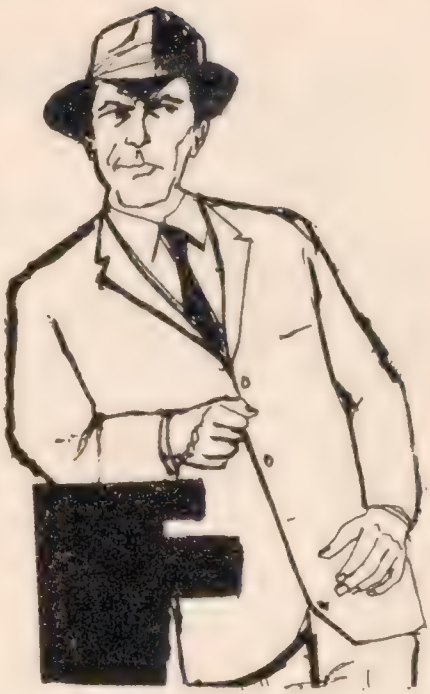
The cop on post down the hall gave him only the most casual glance and went back to thinking about a birthday gift for his sister's boy. He didn't really notice Shayne again until the detective was within two feet of him. Then it was too late.

Shayne showed him the thirty-eight he'd taken from Bill's cab and said, "Just keep your trap shut, boy."

Ronnie Moon was a rookie cop and still unskilled in tricks of his trade or he'd never have let Shayne walk up on him like that. But he made up in bravery what he lacked in savvy. He recognized Shayne, reached for his own gun — which would have gotten him killed if Shayne had been a true killer — and opened his mouth to yell, all at the same time.

Shayne said, "Sorry, kid," and pistol-whipped the rookie hard enough to knock him out. He dragged the youngster down the hall to the service utility closet, tied him up with torn sheets, gagged him so he could breathe but not yell, cuffed him with his own cuffs, and stowed him away inside. Moon would be safe enough until somebody found him there.

The redhead was in a hurry. He figured Lucy would phone Eileen in Martin's apartment about ten. If she delivered her message, Eileen would figure Shayne must have been the one to search her place.



She wouldn't be able to resist the impulse to come upstairs and see if he'd taken anything important. Shayne wanted to be inside the apartment and waiting for her when she arrived.

The locked door posed no real obstacle to the detective. He habitually carried a ring of keys guaranteed to get him through any lock not melted and fused with a blow torch. Disposing of the rookie cop had taken time, though, and he was in a hurry to get inside before some innocent bystander came into the hall and discovered him.

He got the door open and stepped inside, closing it behind him. The huge living room, a duplicate in proportion though not in furnishings to the one on the floor below, was

lit by a single bulb which was dimmed by the heavy leaded, stained glass shade of the Tiffany lamp on the big side table.

Shayne looked around quickly to get his bearings and then headed for the expensive Regency antique secretary standing against one wall. He started looking for the secret compartment such desks usually have.

"Stand right where you are, Mike," said the voice behind him. "Don't do anything fast, and don't reach for the gun you've got to have on you."

Eileen Moore had come out of the bedroom door on the other side of the living room without his hearing her until she spoke. She was wearing a heavy gold evening gown which clung to the lines of her magnificent bust and loins, and a spray of diamonds and emeralds in her hair. Shayne could understand in that instant why a millionaire would risk killing his wife to possess this woman.

The only discordant note was the gun she held in her right hand. It was a businesslike blue steel Smith and Wesson .380 ACP automatic, and she held it as steady as a rock. Shayne could tell that she was familiar with the weapon and would hit whatever she chose if she fired it.

He stood perfectly still.

"You should have known I'd be expecting you," she said then.

"That was my mistake," he said. "I thought you'd be downstairs making love to the first national bank to keep him happy until you got him to the altar."

That beautiful face smiled at him. "A natural mistake, Mike Shayne. A perfectly natural mistake, except that you underestimated me again. Men always seem to do that. It made things easy for me all my life."

"No wedding?" Shayne asked. He was stalling for time. If she wanted to waste minutes boasting, that was going to be perfectly all right with him.

"I don't need a wedding," she said. "Marty told you the truth when he said he had no known relatives. For over a year now his will has named me sole heir if his wife died before I did."

"That was clever of you," Shayne said.

"Of course it was. After that, all I had to do was goad him into murdering Ellen himself. I wouldn't do it or even help him plan it. It was to be all his own idea. Clever, wasn't I?"

She asks meaningless questions like Farrow does, Shayne thought. Aloud he said, "Why did he have to frame me? Couldn't a clever woman like you have kept him from making that little mistake? Without me you'd both be in the clear."

"Sorry about that, darling," she said. "Honestly I am. You're the kind of man I'm going to look for after I get the money all in my name.

Marty's terrible in bed. I know I deserve better.

"I'd have stopped him if I could, but I didn't even know he'd hired you until you came up on my balcony last night. I knew he had somebody with him, but not that it was Mike Shayne. I told you the murder had to be all his so I couldn't possibly be connected with it even as an accessory."

"How about the waiter on the *Miami Belle*?" Shayne asked. "Or was his murder just something that didn't count?"

"That was an accident," she said. "I'm a crack shot. I'd taken Ellen's car after she took a cab to the play. She hated driving at night. I knew Marty was on the cruise boat and I figured he'd see that car at the drawbridge. I was planning to shoot his hat off again, with a rifle.

"I couldn't miss. He'd think Ellen had done it — just as he did in fact think. Then he wouldn't dare let her live much longer. I wanted him to kill her before the detective he'd hired found out too much. Then that stupid fool stepped in front of the bullet."

"Very stupid of him," Shayne said. "Of course, scaring Martin into killing makes you an accessory."

"Not without you to point it out to the police it doesn't," she said.

"I'll make a deal," Shayne said.

She seemed to think that over for a minute. "I wish I could trust you, Mike, darling. I really do, but I couldn't. I've looked you up and you're an honest man. I'm not an honest woman. You wouldn't trust me and I wouldn't trust you. It would be awful. So I'm going to have to kill you."

Mike Shayne started to straighten up from the secretary. She moved the muzzle of the gun just a fraction of an inch and said, "No."

He let his weight fall back on his hands, but this time one hand covered a heavy crystal paperweight on the besk blotter.

"It'll be easy," she said. "You're already wanted for murdering one woman. You broke in here — the man they had on the door will confirm that — and attacked me. I killed you."

"Clever again," he said. "Just for the record — what happens to Marty after I'm dead?"

"He dies, too," she said. "I think it will be called suicide, but anyway he dies. With that will I don't need to marry him. Besides, he stinks when he's frightened."

"What has him so scared today?" Shayne asked. "Did you just miss him again?"

She put her head back and that beautiful slender throat rippled with laughter. "Oh, no. Worse than that. He remembered Ellen couldn't have been in her car on the causeway last night. Just as you figured it out, I suppose. He realized it had to be me that was shooting at him. He realized what was coming, but he doesn't dare expose me for fear of hanging himself for killing Ellen.

He has to sit there with his arms around me and the police watching and know all the time I'm going to kill him. Wouldn't it be wonderful if he just died of fright?"

"That's something I won't do," Shayne said. "Die of fright, I mean."

"I could be in love with you for not being frightened," she said. Her eyes widened and her nostrils dilated. "Mike, I have to shoot you right now before I forget how important it is. Isn't that sad?"

The phone rang.

Lucy Hamilton had called the Farrow apartment and been told Eileen had gone upstairs. She'd called that number then to reach the woman.

Eileen wasn't expecting the call. It startled her for just the split second that Mike Shayne needed.

Still in his crouch over the secretary he threw the three-pound crystal paperweight at her as hard as he could. She fired the gun, of course, but she'd jumped instinctively and the bullet went wild.

The heavy weight struck her right shoulder and staggered her so that she dropped the gun. Then Shayne was on her.

Even then she had sense enough not to waste her breath on screams that wouldn't have been heard in the air-conditioned, sound-proof and insulated building. Instead, she fought like a wildcat, with a determination and ferocity that almost twisted her loose from Shayne's grip.

He gave up finally and knocked her unconscious with a single short right to the jaw. When she went limp he got strips from a sheet in the bedroom and tied her securely into one of her expensive antique chairs. He didn't gag her.

He also used the time to search the apartment until he found the rifle with which she'd shot the waiter on the *Miami Belle*. He had been afraid she might have tossed it into the bay or a canal, but no killer is quite as smart as he or she likes to think they are. The gun would prove the final piece of tangible evidence to prove her identity as X.

Eileen's eyes were open when he came back into the living room carrying the rifle.

"I underestimated you, darling," she said. "You're a lot faster than I thought."

The phone rang again. Lucy Hamilton was still trying. This time Shayne picked it up and held it silently until he heard Lucy's voice saying, "Hello. Hello."

"It's me, Angel," he said then.

"Oh, thank God it's you," she said. "I haven't been able to reach her, Michael. This is about the tenth time I've called for her at this number. You must have seen her. Maybe you're with her now. I hope I haven't failed you."

"No," he said. "No, you certainly haven't. Everything's under control so far. I reached her instead, and she's the X I was looking for. I can prove that much now."

As he spoke he could see Eileen Moore watching him.

"Wonderful," Lucy said. "Does that clear you of the murder charge? I don't suppose it does, Michael!"

"Of course it doesn't," Shayne said, "but don't you worry about that. I think I know now how I can do it."

"Fine. How?"

"I said not to worry about it. Criminals always leave holes in their plans. Right now you call Tim. Tell him to call Petey Painter and have him meet Tim at Farrow's apartment as fast as he can make it. Give Tim this number and have him call me here as soon as he gets to Farrow's. He can tell Petey I'll come in and give myself up then."

"Is that wise?"

"I wish I knew, Angel. I think the only chance I've got is to force Farrow while he's still in a panic and can't think straight. I've got to try. I can't run forever and I don't dare let this go to trial with all the evidence against me."

He hung up then.

All the time he'd been talking Eileen Moore had been watching and listening and twisting against her bonds. Now she actually managed to smile at him.

"Why don't you have the money instead of Martin?" she asked. "What a time we could have. You're a man a woman could love, Mike. All that body and brains too."

"You think I'm right?"

"Of course you're right. The only chance you have to get out of the net Marty's put over you is to addle his poor brains while he's still scared to death."

She paused to let him think it over. Then: "It won't be easy. A man can endure a lot when his life's at stake. Marty won't want to make a mistake that'll hang him. Why not make a deal with me, darling? I can help, you know."

"What sort of a deal?" Shayne asked.

"You forget about the X part. That waiter was just an accident anyway. I did nothing to frame you. I didn't even know what he was up to, didn't want to know. So you forget about me, and I'll help you get Marty to confess he framed you. What do you thing of that?"

"I think it stinks," Shayne said. "That way I'd just be helping you kill Farrow another way. You don't care whether he gets executed for murder or shoots himself or you shoot him. No more than you cared about the waiter or about me. Just as long as Martin Farrow dies and that will of his leaves you the money."

"Why, darling," she said, "think what it could be for us. You and me and all that money. Every time we made love it would be electric."

"So it would," Shayne said, "but I think maybe I'd prefer the electric chair. I couldn't trust you. Good old Marty trusted you and look what happened. You've got too many bodies on your back trail because peo-

ple trusted you, Eileen. I'd always be afraid I was getting to be expendable, or replaceable or something."

Neither of them said any more for a while. Shayne knew she was working at her bonds where he'd tied her up, but he didn't really care. After a while she'd work them loose, but by that time he'd have made his try at Martin Farrow and either won or lost. If the woman got away then it wouldn't really hurt him one way or the other. If she didn't, she'd have to explain a lot of things to Petey Painter.

She'd probably manage that. Shayne couldn't remember ever seeing a beautiful and clever woman executed for anything. He didn't really care.

"I could help you," she said finally. "I really could help you with Marty."

"No," he said. "I don't think you could. Marty doesn't love you any more. He's just afraid of you now. He's afraid of me, too."

She didn't say any more.

After a while the phone rang again, and when Mike Shayne answered it was Tim Rourke on the other end.

"I'm in the Farrow apartment," he said. "Petey's here too. He won't believe you're coming in. He says you're crazy if you do. I agree with him."

"No," Shayne said. "I'm crazy if I don't come in. You tell them I said so. Tell it where Martin Farrow can hear. Say I've got proof I was framed."

"You have?"

"No, I haven't, but Martin is going to give it to me. Tell them what I said. I'll give Martin five minutes more to sweat, and then I'll knock on the door."

Shayne hung up the phone.

"Mike," Eileen said, "you're wonderful. I want to make love with you while Marty sweats downstairs."

"Sorry," he said.

"You should be. It would be wonderful. Are you going to take me down with you?"

"No," he said, and saw the triumph in her eyes when he said it. He knew she was almost free of her bonds by that. "No. There aren't any lines for you in this scene. This one I'm going to play out all by myself."

He checked his watch and went out into the hall. He heard her low, throaty laughter as he closed the door. On his way he opened the service closet door and pulled the bound and gagged rookie cop out into the hall where the first passerby would find him and cut him loose.

When he knocked on the door of the Farrow apartment it opened instantly. When he stepped inside the room a solid wall of policemen closed in around him.

Shayne pushed through as if they weren't there at all.

"Hold him!" Chief Painter yelled. "Search him. Cuff him!"

"Leave me alone," Shayne said.

"I came in on my own. Just let me be."

"Grab him!" Painter said. "Shayne, you're under arrest. The charge is murder."

"I'll sue you for false arrest," Shayne said. "So help me God, that's what I'll do." He looked at the men standing around him. "Watch out, boys. I'll name any man that touches me in the suit." They just stood there.

"I didn't come down here to play games," Mike Shayne said. "I came to solve your case for you as usual, Petey. What do you think about that?"

Painter's thoughts were lurid. Even some of his hardened assistants learned a word or two. The little man stood in the middle of the room and practically foamed at the mouth.

Tim Rourke was mixing himself a drink at the Farrow portable bar. He took a swallow to test his handiwork.

Martin Farrow sat all by himself in the exact center of the big couch over against the doors to the balcony. There was beard stubble on his chin and his skin was pallid. He sweated and shook so that his teeth clicked together audibly. His eyes were those of a trapped wolverine, and he darted them from place to place, avoiding only the dark stain where Ellen's blood had dried into that incredible white carpet.

Shayne shot out a big hand in a dramatic gesture:

"There's your murderer, Petey,"

he pointed at Farrow. "Arrest him and charge him."

"You're crazy," Painter said. Then he looked at Farrow.

The man's whole body was jerking galvanically as if electric current was being shot into him. None of them had ever seen a man so frightened before.

"I'm not crazy," Shayne said. "Look at him, all of you. Did you ever see a better picture of guilt? He wanted his wife dead for some reason of his own. So he asked me up here and had me open the safe. When my prints were all over the place, and my back was turned, he knocked me out and took my gun. He knew his wife was due home from the theatre. When she walked in he used my gun to kill her. Then

he tied himself up. Anybody can do that. He knocked over the phone."

Martin Farrow forced out one word. "Lies!" he screamed.

"It makes sense to me," Tim Rourke said. "Use your head, Painter. We all know Mike. He doesn't rob clients while they watch him. If that poor woman had come in on him, he'd have knocked her out, not shot her."

"Think about it, chief," one of Painter's lieutenants said.

Painter was obviously shaken.

"The evidence," he said. "All the evidence hangs Shayne. He hasn't a thing to back his story."

"No evidence," said the half-insane figure on the couch.

"Of course I've got evidence," Shayne said. This was where he bet his life on a hunch. He wouldn't have another chance.

"You found a gun — my gun — on the rug half under the woman's body," he said very carefully. One of the Beach detectives nodded. "Mrs. Farrow had a bronze statuette in her hand with which she'd hit the killer. I show marks of being hit, but on the back of my head. Farrow's wound is on top of the head."

"No, no, no!" Farrow almost screamed.

"That doesn't prove my case," Shayne said, "but this does. The serial number of that gun showed it was registered to me. My prints are on it, because I handle it all the time. You probably lifted a set right off. Now I want you to give that gun a real going over. You'll find Farrow's prints over mine."

"No. You lie. You liar!" Farrow screamed again.

Shayne ignored him. "He took my gun, like I said. When his wife came in she saw it in his hand and knew what was coming. She grabbed the bronze Hermes and hit him. He fired, but the recoil and the blow made him drop the gun. She fell onto it, dead. You'll find his prints."

"No," Farrow screamed. "No evidence. You'll find nothing."

"You'll find his prints," Mike Shayne said inexorably. "Dust that gun again."

Farrow stood up, but his legs wouldn't hold him. He fell back against the couch.

"You'll find nothing," he screamed at the roomful of police. "Nothing. I was too smart for you. I wiped the gun where I held it. After I shot her I wiped off the gun."

"He's all yours, Petey," Shayne said. "Take him away."

Next Month —

THE AIRPORT MURDER—A NEW *MIKE SHAYNE* SHORT NOVEL

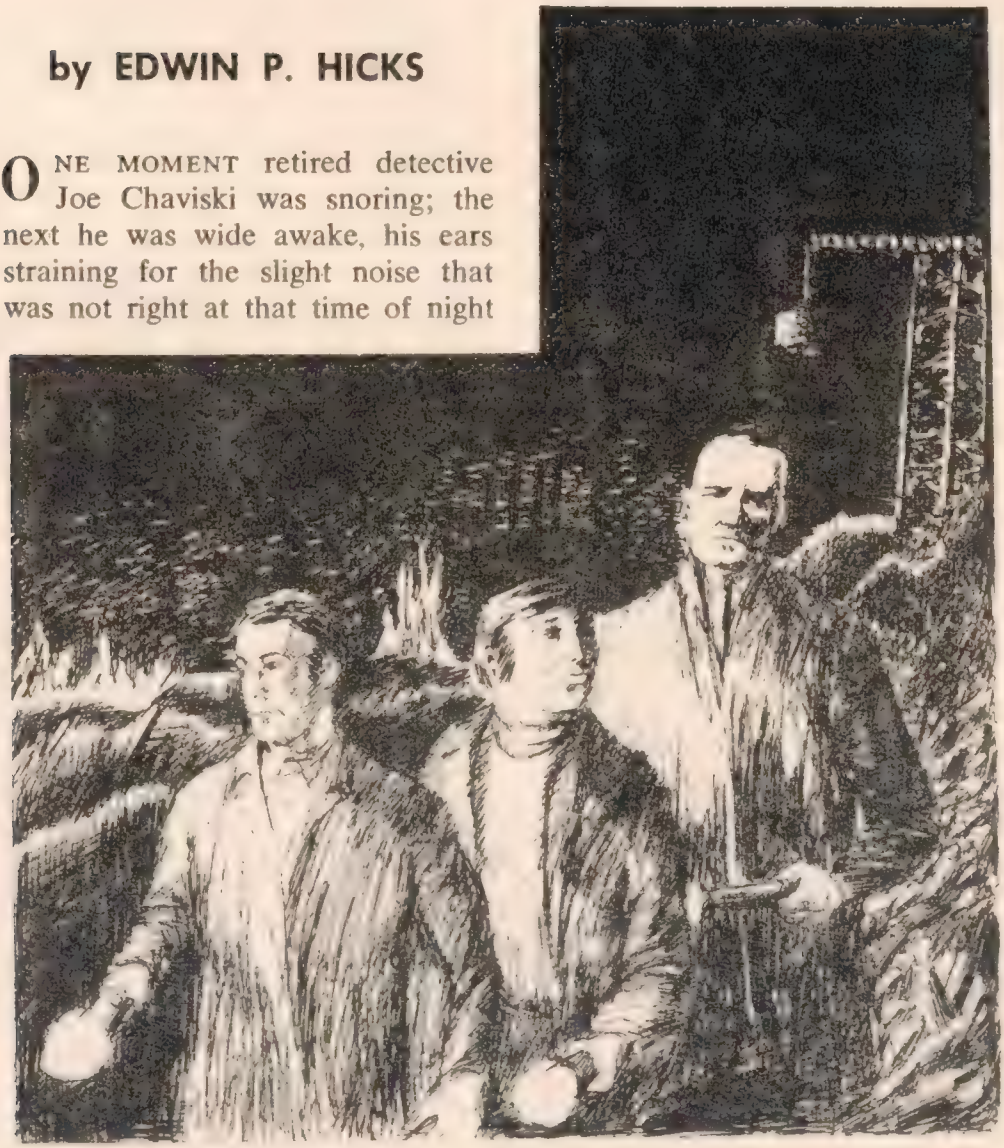
by BRETT HALLIDAY

From the first kid theft to the gas chamber . . . It may not be as long a road as you think. Not for—

THE BAD ONES

by EDWIN P. HICKS

ONE MOMENT retired detective Joe Chaviski was snoring; the next he was wide awake, his ears straining for the slight noise that was not right at that time of night



—3 A.M. There it was again, metal against metal and then a sort of burp, like a hubcap coming off a wheel!

The habits of thirty years on the police force couldn't be denied. He sprang to his feet.

Within seconds Chaviski had drawn on his trousers and slippers and was edging like a cat through the darkness to the front door. The sound had come from the Ransome driveway next door. He eased out of the house soundless, surprisingly so for the big man that he was. Ducking behind the hedge, he worked himself within six feet of two youths who were removing the hubcaps from the Fred Ransome car.

He pounced on them, a great ham of a hand collaring each of the youngsters and twisting a surprising yell from one of them. They were two kids, fourteen or fifteen years old. Joe Chaviski dragged the two towards the corner street light.

On the way he saw the switchblade knife appear, and with reflex action his great hand came down edgewise with the speed of a striking rattlesnake on the boy's wrist. The knife clattered to the ground, and the punk grabbed his wrist with his other hand, while his breath came out sharply in a half moan, half sob.

Still twisting collars, Chaviski turned the pair around under the street light and looked them over.

"No!" he said. "Not little Billy Duggan! Your father will turn over in his grave! And Mike Scanlon! You wouldn't sit down for a month, boy, if Big Mike had caught you doing this"

"Dirty fuzz!" snarled Billy Duggan.

"Take your filthy hands off my neck," said Mike Scanlon. "We got civic rights—"

"Civil rights," the other corrected.

"You're danged right you have," said Chaviski, "and you've also got civil responsibilities and you're going to start to take care of them right now."

With his hands still entwined in their collars, Chaviski marched them to the front door of the Ransome home. "Now Billy, press the door bell."

The boy objected. Joe Chaviski tightened his grip and kneed him in the seat of the pants. "Ring that door bell. Ring it again."

A light came on in the house, then the entrance light, and elderly Fred Ransome opened the door. He was wearing a night shirt, which he had thrust inside at pair of trousers. "Joe Chaviski! What do you want, Joe?"

"There two punks got some apologizing to do," said Chaviski.

"Apologizing? What for?"

"Step out here to your driveway. I caught them stealing the hub caps off your car."

The old man came out, saw the

hubcaps lying on the driveway. shook his head sadly.

"And I always liked boys," he said. "What's their names?"

"Let's forget about names," said Chaviski. "Look them over good so you can remember them and let me take it from there."

Ransome nodded. "All right, Joe."

Chaviski faced them up in the light of the entrance lamp, while Mr. Ransome studied the youth gravely. "I'll remember them, Joe."

"All right, fellows," said Joe Chaviski. "Speak your pieces. Tell Mr. Ransome you're sorry."

"I'm sorry," said Billy Duggan.

"So'm I," said Mike.

"Do either of you know this gentleman?"

"No, we just come along and seen the car," Billy said

"Then Fred, don't let it bother you or hurt your feelings. These boys didn't mean anything personal. I knew their fathers. They are both dead. I'll take things into my hands if you don't want to press charges."

"No," said Ransome. "You handle it your way. It will be in good hands."

"Good night then, Mr. Ransome. Sorry to have disturbed you," Chaviski said. "I'll see that your hubcaps are put back on your car."

When Ransome had gone back into the house and turned off the light, Joe Chaviski turned the boys loose. "All right, get those hubcaps back on. Don't try to run off. I know you both, and I know where you live."

"You've violated our civil rights," Billy said. "You didn't say nothin' about what we said would be used against us, and what we was charged with, and about one telephone call."

"Hogwash," said Chaviski. "I haven't arrested you. Not yet I haven't. Get the heck over there and put those hubcaps back on. So far you're free as a bird. But if any more hubcaps are reported missing tonight, if any places are broken into and the marble machines robbed, you'll be first lads behind bars tomorrow. Get busy, and then I'm taking you home. You better stay there if you know what's good for you."

Joe Chaviski took them home and came on back and made a pot of coffee and ate a pint of vanilla ice cream. It was four A.M. He really wasn't hungry, and breakfast time wasn't too far away. And as he ate, the old trip-hammer was pounding inside his skull. Dang it! He didn't have any children of his own. He and his late, beloved Lucy had wanted children, but somehow they never came.

One of the blessings of not fathering children, he had always consoled himself, was that he didn't have the responsibilities of guiding them to adulthood. But now, dang it, he had these two boys, Billy Duggan and Mike Scanlon, on his

hands. And he had a responsibility towards them. They mustn't get off on the wrong track.

There was Pat Duggan, father of Billy. Pat was too good a man to be a policeman. Too trusting. One night he was bringing in two seventeen year-old punks for investigation. Pat hadn't searched them thoroughly. On the way, one of the young hoodlums had pulled an old-fashioned Derringer, had reached around his companion, and shot Pat under the arm, the bullet penetrating his heart. Little Billy Duggan was seven years old at the time.

Big Mike Scanlon, father of the boy whom he had just delivered home, had been a blustering sort of Irishman, the very picture of a hard boiled cop. Actually the hard boil was only skin deep. Mike was as soft as mashed potatoes inside. He had been killed in a traffic accident while chasing a drugstore hi-jacker. His car had crashed into a fire-engine responding to a false alarm. Mike Junior was only eight.

Little Billy Duggan, little Mike Scanlon, Junior! Joe Chaviski remembered how happy their fathers were when they were handing out cigars to the boys at the station, the days their sons were born. They even passed out cigars to the prisoners! Thank heavens Mike and Pat had fair pensions as well as Social Security for the boys—and Mary Duggan and Liz Scanlon, their wives, had managed to get by. Mary took in sewing at her home, while Liz was a saleslady in a department store.

They had done the best they could for their sons, but now Billy Duggan and Mike Scanlon were at the age where they needed the firm hand of a man to guide them.

Sure, every policeman on the force had pledged himself to help look after Mary Duggan's and Liz Scanlon's boys, but good intentions have a way of dwindling down to nothing, and the passing of time changes things. They boys were missing their fathers.

Billy and Mike had been running out at night, all hours of the night, and stealing hubcaps. And if they were stealing hubcaps they wouldn't hesitate to break into places and steal cokes and rob marble-boards. Next step was "borrowing" cars. Yes sir, these youngsters were looking straight down the wide road that led to the reform school, drugs, prison, a life of crime and violent death! Joe had seen it happen too many times.

"Fuzz," they had called him, and they had demanded their civil rights. These were things that hurt Joe almost as much as their taking the hubcaps. Next it would be "pigs," they would call him. In the old days their fathers had got sore when anyone called them "cop" or "copper."

Joe Chaviski paid a visit to Mary Duggan's home during the morning. Mary broke down and cried. Yes,

Billy had been causing her trouble lately. School was out for the summer, but she had had a hard time keeping him in school. His grades had dropped. Once or twice she thought she had smelled beer on his breath. Whipping seemed to do very little good.

"And actually, Joe," she had said, "while I'm not a small woman, I can hardly handle him any more. But I had no idea that he was slipping out at night with his buddy, Mike Scanlon."

"I'd like to see what I can do with him, Mary," Chaviski said. "I never had a boy, but I was a boy once. I think I know how a boy feels, and I know how Pat Duggan would feel about it. Let me handle him a night or two."

Mary smiled. "Bless you Joe! A boy need's a man's looking after. You can have Billy every night if you want."

"I'll be around about 8:30 tonight," said Chaviski.

Joe Chaviski called on Liz Scanlon at the store and took her out to lunch.

IT WAS MISTING rain when Joe Chaviski picked up the two youths that night at 8:30. In each instance he sent them back for their rain coats.

"Where we going?" Mike Scanlon wanted to know.

"The fuzz," said Chaviski, "wants to take you for a ride."

"I don't like smart cops a damn bit," said Billy Duggan.

"Me neither," said Pat.

"And I don't like rats," said Chaviski, "any shade of rats. And not even punks on their way to becoming rats."

"If you want to get real personal," Mike blustered, "we could call you pigs."

"Rats suits me," said Chaviski. "When I think of criminals and punks that steal hubcaps and carry switch blade knives, I think of rats."

The two youngsters snarled their defiance as the car moved down the lower end of the avenue towards the river front. Garish lights burned in front of *Pop's Place*, and the *Western Bar*, and the sound of honky-tonk music blared out through swinging doors.

Joe Chaviski eased the car into a crawl. "Sound like old home week to you fellows? Your one aim in life to get old enough to crawl into a place like that?"

"Whatta you doing, Chaviski? Why you pouring it on us like that?

We ain't never been caught in a place like that."

"The only reason you haven't is you're minors," said Chaviski. "If I wanted to be right ugly I'd take you to the station and let you tell the cops where you been getting that beer you been drinking."

"We ain't been drinking no beer," said Billy Duggan.

"No use telling me a lie," said Chaviski. "I'm not telling on you—not now anyway."

Now the car was winding its way along the railroad tracks, heading northward. It turned left past the old cottonseed mill, and towards the river.

"Where we going?" said Mike.

"I'm taking you to a place you fellows ought to get used to. It's the city dump."

The car passed over the grade of the last track in the switching yard, went steepily down the right-of-way embankment on the other side, and pushed on to halt at the edge of a nightmarish world of smoke and burning oil and scorched odors, junk, refuse, and chaos.

"Everybody out," said Chaviski. "Welcome to the city dump!"

"What the hell! I ain't getting out in a place like this. Look at that black mud!" said Billy Duggan.

Joe Chaviski, who was already out of the car, walked around and opened the doors on the other side. "Out!"

No one moved.

Chaviski seized Mike by the collar and yanked him out vigorously. He did the same for Billy.

"That's assault!" Billy screamed.

Chaviski laughed. "You're lucky if you get out of this night without me whipping your tail. Now come along with me. I want you to mingle with some of your friends."

They headed towards the burning oil, the flickering flames, and the pink haze that hung over the place in the mist and rain. Joe Chaviski handed each of them a flashlight.

"Watch your step," he said. "You might cut your foot on broken glass or the edge of a tin can."

Three spears of light shot out. Numerous pairs of gleaming red eyeballs looked back at them.

"What's that?" said Billy Duggan.

"Meet your brother rats," said Chaviski. "Turn your lights off. Stand here and listen and just get the atmosphere of the place."

The lights snapped off. Immediately the gentle scraping sounds were resumed from various places in front of them and on all sides.

"What's all that scraping?" said Mike.

"That's your buddies again. That's rats, hundreds of them, thousands of them." Joe Chaviski flicked his light back on. A large rat, the size of a small alley cat, scrambled away from Billy Duggan's feet. Billy leaped back.

"Rats and criminals get real

brave in the dark," Chaviski said. "Now come on. We want a real look at their hangout."

They advanced to the edge of the bank of the river slough. Beyond the break was a thirty-five foot slope down to the edge of the dark, filthy water. The slope was covered with old mattresses, pieces of orange crate, broken stoves, bottomless tubs, buckets pasteboard cartons and boxes, broken bottles, rusty bathtubs, and thousands of tin cans.

From the cans and rubbage came the rustlings, the scrapings, the squeaks of rats on the move, rats socializing, r a t s fighting, rats searching for food. The three flashlights, playing down upon the drop-off shined the eyes of perhaps fifty rats, moving in and out among the cans and rubbish. Some were drinking water from the slough.

"Imagine what would happen to any living thing that was tied down here and helpless," Joe Chaviski said. "They would be torn to pieces in minutes. That's exactly the way criminals act. They prey upon anything that is weak and helpless.

"Now turn off your lights again," he commanded, snapping his off. They did. The effect was eerie, weird, like a scene from hell itself —acres upon acres of city dump, with the flames licking up from the burning oil which had been poured upon the rubbish, and reflecting the fog and rain.

The rest was blackness, chaos, maliciousness. Over all was the sound of the scraping tails and brownish-gray b o d i e s working among the cans and boxes—and the squeaking, the rustle—and the smell of burning food and oil, the patter of the rain.

Billy Duggan suddenly screamed and snapped on his light.

"I can't stand it," he said. "One of those rats ran across my foot."

"Okay," said Chaviski, "lights on. I just wanted you to see how rats live. You bright young fellows call us fuzz and pigs. But to us coppers criminals are like rats, and rats thrive in places like this, living on garbage. Human rats end up in places like this—most of them. Even a dumb cop has got more sense than that."

"I want to go home," said Mike.

"Uh uh," said Chaviski, "not yet. Young punks like you two hubcap thieves, work in the dark, in the blackness like these rats, and there's a long night ahead. I want to show you a lot more of it.

"Look, Mr. Chaviski, we get the point. There's no need pouring it on."

"Oh I'm not pouring it on, really," said Chaviski. "I'm not even telling the dumb cops about you two snatching hubcaps or anything else. I'm not turning you over to the probation officer. He could burn your tails good if he wanted to. But our little night is not through, not by a long shot. You're going to see a few more things. I want you

to see where your fathers worked with me, where they would have taken you long ago if they were still alive."

"Big deal!" snarled Mike. "Think of it, Billy, he's taking us down to the police station."

"I sure am," said Chaviski.

The station was bare, except for Desk Sergeant Pinky Howard, and Jim Higgins, the radio operator.

"Where is everybody?" Chaviski asked.

"Stabbing out at the Yellow Tavern," said Howard. "Slim Bowdre got it."

"Kill him?"

"Deader than a doornail. Stabbed plumb through the heart."

"Who did it?"

"Guy Canada. Just a drunken fight. You remember that little punk that caused us so much trouble when you were working?"

"Sure do," said Chaviski. "Three terms in the industrial school before he was twenty-one. Started out picking up things in the five and ten, then it was copper wire and hubcaps, then bustin' in honky-tonks, and stealing cars."

"Just like Chief always used to say," said Howard, "reform school is to the penitentiary what Sunday school is to church. What you got there Joe?"

"Remember Mike Scanlon and Pat Duggan? These are their two boys. Just wanted to show them through the place.

Howard rose and grasped their hands. "How proud Pat Duggan would be to see you, son—and you Mike. Your father had great plans for you. Many a day and night too me and your daddies put in together running down crooks. Joe can tell you about it. Your fathers were fine men, both of them."

Chaviski showed the boys the docket book.

"You don't never want to get your names on that book," said Howard.

"You sure don't," said Chaviski. "That's a permanent record. Once your name gets on that book, it stays there. Then later on you apply for a job you'd give your eyeteeth for. The first thing a job investigator does is to come here to see if you've got a police record. You get a police record, you don't get the job."

They took a tour of the jail then, peering through the iron bars at the gray cells within, at the cots, the bare toilets, the plastered brick walls, the cement floors. The place smelled of creosote and disinfectant. There were dim, single bulb lights in ceiling sockets. Two of the cells were empty. A man was sleeping in a third cell, his face towards the wall.

This is a sort of intermediate place for the rats," said Chaviski. "Criminals spend a lot of their time in barred hotel resorts like this on their way to the dump heap. Now we'll take the elevator to the third and fourth floors, where they keep

the state and federal prisoners. There's more than a hundred of them serving time or awaiting trial. Some of them have been up there for weeks. They were unable to make bond. I sure want you to see them. Wonderful place!"

But they didn't visit the county and federal jails. There was a sudden bustle outside the door, and Chaviski grapped his two charges and hustled them through the gate and to the safe side of Sergeant Howard's desk. There was a surge through the door, and the place all at once was overflowing with police officers, and two of them were dragging a scrawny, wild-eyed prisoner, who was struggling and shouting obscenities.

"Guy Canada," said Chaviski. "He's finally arrived at where he was headed all these years. He's finally killed a man."

The officers took Canada inside the barred enclosure, went through his pockets, put his billfold, containg two one dollar bills, on the counter.

"Book him for investigation of murder," said Chief Detective Marty Sauer. "Better put him in the run-around. He's still drunk on whisky and goof balls."

"It's a damned lie!" screamed Canada. "I ain't drunk. The doctor give me some medicine. I ain't guilty of nothing. Slim Bowdre was coming at me with a broken beer bottle. It was me or him."

Sauer deposited a large manila envelope on Howard's counter.

"That's the knife that killed Bowdre," he said. "Have Johnny run a lab test. Hyah Joe. Smell of blood get you down here?"

"Just showing a couple of young men through the place," said Chaviski. "These are Mike Scanlon and Pat Duggan's boys. Meet Marty Sauer, Chief of Detectives."

"Hiyah, boys," said Saure, sticking out his hand. "You giving us a look-over to see if you want to be cops like your dads?"

"Joe brung us down here," said Mike.

Chaviski winked at Sauer. "Just showing them through the place. Thought it was time they saw what the inside of a police station and jail looked like. Where'd they take Bowdre?"

"To the Border City mortuary. I've requested an autopsy."

"Thanks, Marty. Come on boys, we'll be moving along."

Outside Billy Duggan wanted to know where they were going.

"Oh to a quiet place, where there isn't much happening," said Chaviski. "You know I showed you one place where criminals end up—the dump heap. Now I'm going to show you another."

Joe Chaviski parked his car at the back of the Border City mortuary.

"Come on fellows," he said cheerfully, "other interesting things to see—other things to learn."

A blue light burned above the

doorway. The rest of the place looked dark.

"I don't want to go in there," said Mike, his voice raising in alarm.

"Me neither," said Billy. "I ain't got no business going in there."

"Oh yes you have," said Chaviski. "You fellows have started out. I want to show you where you are headed. It's up to me to show you some of the things you're going to run into farther along the road. You saw where some criminals wind up down on the rat heap. Others end lying on a hard slab, same as Bowdre. Bowdre has been fighting the law all his life. Didn't have sense enough to live an honest life. Couldn't make it legitimately."

A dim, hall light came on inside the mortuary, in response to the bell, and a a tall, dark man, in his fifties came to the door, pulling on his coat on the way.

"Why Joe Chaviski," he said. "Haven't seen you in a dog's age."

Chaviski and he shook hands. "Charlie Whipple, want you to meet a couple of boys, friends of mine. I knew their dads. You did too. This is Mike Scanlon's boy. You remember Scanlon, of course. You buried him. And this is Pat Duggan's son, Billy. I want them to have a look at the guy who was stabbed—Bowdre."

Whipple grinned at Chaviski. "He's a mess, Joe. We haven't cleaned him up or nothing. Waiting on whether or not there is to be an autopsy."

"That's all right, Charlie. These guys might train into peace officers themselves some day. Been showing them around, lecturing them on what happens to guys who run afoul of the law."

"Okay," said Whipple. "Follow me." He led them down the hall and switched on a light in a side room.

Billy Duggan would have turned back, but Chaviski's great body stood between him and the hall exit.

A white sheet covered a form on the slab. Whipple drew back the sheet. Bowdre, a man about 35, lay there his mouth opened hideously, exposing numerous gold teeth. Blood from his mouth and nose had dried on his face. His throat had been cut, and his shirt had been slashed on his left side and was covered with blood.

"Looks like some guy got him with a pig-sticker beneath his ribs and walked around him," said Whipple. "Then they cut his throat."

Billy Duggan pressed his hand to his mouth and began looking about wildly.

"That way, son," said Whipple. There's a toilet through that door."

Billy rushed through the door. A moment later they heard him vomiting.

Mike Scanlon stood looking at the ghastly thing on the slab, un-

able to move except for his hands, which suddenly had got the shakes. His face was as white as the slab upon which Slim Bowdre lay.

"Okay, Charlie. You can cover it up. Thanks. Got to get these kids home for their beauty sleep."

"I was going to buy you fellows your supper," said Chaviski, when they were back in the car again.

"I couldn't eat a bite," said Mike.

"Me neither," said Billy.

"Okay, okay. Sorry boys I had to be a little rough on you tonight. But I couldn't let your dads down. I thought too much of them to let you boys get off on the wrong foot. I just wanted you to see what happens to fellows who get onto the skids and go into crime. There's court I was going to take you to —and Slim's funeral.

"But I expect you have seen enough. You get into another jam, I'm taking you on a little jaunt down to look over the boys' industrial school—and a side trip over to the penitentiary. I know the warden. He would arrange a real tour for us. How's about it, fellows? Have you learned anything, or do you want to see more?"

"Please, Mr. Chaviski. Please! We've had enuogh, haven't we, Billy?"

"I'm sorry I took the darn old hubcaps," said Billy.

"Okay, fellows. Just remember this—tonight you ran up against the real thing. There's no glamour in being a criminal. And I want you to remember another thing. I mean business, just like your fathers would mean business if they were here to guide you."

Joe Chaviski paused and grinned. "One more thing. You're not off the hook yet. I'm drafting you Friday and Saturday to go fishing with me. We'll go down to Pine Lake. Everything will be on me. I know where the crappie will be hitting this time of year—and maybe we can pick up a few good bass."

The boys looked at each other in unbelief. Then they both yelled and began pounding each other.

"I never went fishing a day in my life," said Billy. "You'll have to teach me."

"Me neither," said Mike.

"It's a deal," said Chaviski. "You'll all be rested up for the jobs you're starting Monday."

"Jobs! What jobs?"

"You're both starting as grocery sackers and carry-out boys at the Star Supermarket at nine sharp Monday morning. You work five full days a week. And when school starts, you work after school and on week ends."

Billy looked at Mike, Mike looked at Billy, then at Joe Chaviski. "Gee, Mr. Chaviski, it's too bad you ain't a father," Mike said fervently.

"Yes," said Billy, "I wish you was mine."

MURDER ON LAZY RIVER

Strange trails met and crossed on that dark river. Trails that could lead a man to sudden wealth — or sudden, fearsome death . . .

by EDWARD Y. BREESE

I HAVE FRIENDS in the one-hundred-dollar-a-day palaces on Miami Beach and in the spurious Thibetan Kangs behind the bougainvillea and mahogany in Coconut Grove. I also have friends on the River, and sometimes I go and visit them. I'm Johnny Hawk, and I go where I please.

The River goes up through the heart of town, past hotels and twenty-story office blocks and under the swooping high curves of the expressway bridges. It nods to the sleek yachts in the repair and service yards and swallows the baited hooks of old men and bare-legged black children.

It passes filth-encrusted banks in slumville and manicured lawns of park and mansion and goes on by the junk yards and the sheet iron industrial plants with equal insouciance.

In the end it is joined by the slow brown canals that bring water snakes and antediluvian gar and warm liquid mud down out of the swamps.

The River is a world and a nation all to itself, and like any other

Featuring

JOHNNY HAWK

nation has its citizens. Some of them live in luxury apartments and sit on terraces in the evening cool. Some live in crumbling shacks and many more in boats tied to the sea walls and the bankside trees.

They are white, brown, black, yellow and red and they speak diverse tongues and think in diverse ways. We call some "yachtsmen" and some "river rats." The unifying factor is the River itself. The city seldom knows what goes on there, but the river people know.

One day they pulled a body out of the turgid flood under that very same bridge where tarpon sometimes roll. Because I am amistoso to the River world I recognize the name buried in a back page paragraph of my morning paper. I finished breakfast, dressed and went over to the city morgue.

Old Charlie trundled out the stretcher on its noiseless rubber wheels and pulled back the covering canvas sheet. I had a moment then to say goodbye to Coontie Jim. He was older than fear itself and the brown washed out of the wrinkled face by water and death. They don't prettify the unclaimed county dead, so nothing had been done about the second mouth where his throat had been cut.

"You'd be surprised at the number of folks have been in to see old Jim," the morgue custodian said. "River people and the families of pioneers. Even Judge Cable. He said Jim took him fishing when he was a boy."

"It's no surprise," I said. "This was a Man with the capital M. He's been loved and respected since long before you and I were born."

"I'm sixty-three, Mr. Hawk."

"Before you and I were born," I repeated. "Old Coontie was close to one hundred. Who do they think killed him?"

"Nobody knows," old Charlie said. "Them sheriff's people are looking into it right now."

"They got the panic button pushed about it, Charlie?"

"You know better, Mr. Hawk. They save that for a mortgage man or a lawyer or something. The fellas on the case'll do their best, though. You can count on that."

"Yes," I said. "I know I can."

A couple of overworked deputies would put in a little time questioning barkeeps and stool pigeons without really knowing where to start. Coontie would go into the ground in a cardboard box, and that would be that.

It wasn't right. Old Coontie Jim had been on the River since there was nobody in South Florida but wreckers and Indians, Old Man Brickell the trader, and a couple of dozen fellows who boiled starch out of the roots of the coontie plant. He was pioneer, founding father, guide and friend in his day to half the important native sons.

Late years he'd lived alone, fished and traded yarns with all comers.

He bought rice and molasses and biscuit flour with the small pension he got from the state.

One thing I knew. He never set out to hurt any decent man in his life. Whoever cut his old throat had to be both mean and scared. I figured I'd like to know who and why.

So I went on down to the River to see my friend, "Professor" Jersey, on his boat above the Fifth Street Bridge. Jersey probably had been a professor once, before cheap whiskey corroded away his will to achieve. I'd bet it was at a good school, too. He had the Ivy League knack of tying the ancient bow ties he wore, and a fondness for battered white buck shoes and ten dollar words. There were boxes of good books amidst the tumbled gear in the hold of his unpainted forty-foot motor fisher, the *Mary K*. I liked his conversation, and he liked mine.

It was still early when I got there, so he wasn't more than about a quarter drunk.

"Aha," Jersey said. "It's Johnny, the beau sabreur. Like to bet I know why you're here, my friend?"

"You know," I said. "Who did it, professor?"

He fished a can of beer out of the bucket where it was cooling in a mess of stinking ice chips from the fish house across the river and opened a pair of triangles in the top with the corner of a rusty hatchet.

I took a pull from the can. It was good beer, and cold.

"Who did it, professor?" I said.

"Who cut Coontie's throat?" he repeated. "Alliterative, isn't it, John? Who opened a second mouth to close the first? That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"If you say so, professor."

"I say so, John. Yes, that's what I say. People come and go here, you know. Some in boats and some along the footpath. Mostly they like to stop and tell the news. The belief — what these pseudo-intellectuals of our day would call the educated guess, John — is that the old man had stumbled on something too hot to hold."

"It figures," I said.

Professor Jersey went on like he hadn't heard me.

"It was too hot to hold and too sticky to let go. At least someone seems to have thought so, my quest-

ing knight. Else why give him a ticket for Charon's ferry on the last dark river of all?" He opened himself another can of beer.

"I know. That's what I thought. But who? Where does the finger of popular instinct point?"

"I don't know, John. I really don't. Not yet at least. But if I sit here long enough, and you with me, then we will. All the speculation and most of the knowledge in the world comes to this boat sooner or later."

Out in mid-river a horn tootled, and we both looked up. Captain Fat Sam Carter was waving from the pilot house of his miniature tugboat.

"Howdy, Jersey," he called. "Long time no see, Johnny."

We waved back.

The *Fat Sally* was about two-thirds the size of a normal harbor tug and her owner was at least four-thirds as big as a normal fat man. He barely made it into the pilot house. Together they made a living in what I called "the mystic and magical trade in sand."

I never really understood it. There was always a string of tugs taking barges upriver loaded with dirty bay bottom sand. Later on they came back down full of clean sand. Professor Jersey said it went to cement plants up the coast.

I never quite bought that story, but I haven't a better one to offer. Anyway, it was a sight to see, one of the sights our tourists always manage to miss.

I waved to the two Fats more or less mechanically. The Professor was a bit more observant.

"That's funny," Jersey said. "Fat Sam has company today."

Sure enough, I got a passing glimpse of three strangers inside the *Sally's* cabin, playing cards at the small, built-in table. They were blue-jowled, hard-faced customers and pretty well filled up the none-too-generous available space. Ben, the deckhand, was in the stern, gloomily contemplating the wake. Then they were gone, blotted out by a down-coming island schooner.

I said, "Do you happen to know where old Coontie Jim lived? I don't."

"Well, I do. Not many can say that, either. The old fellow liked his privacy, and the way the whole river knew him for an easy touch, he'd have been running a camp if he'd told it around. Want to go take a look-see?"

"I do," I said. "Come on and I'll drive you there."

"You mean drive me to where we can walk in." He laughed. "A bientot, John. Let us go and sherlock the scene."

Jersey's boat was hidden from passing traffic by an oversized billboard urging Health-Thru-Crunchy-Wunchies or some similar nonsense. My car was parked on the street side. I'll swear I hadn't been on the boat more than fifteen minutes, but

when we walked out all four of my tires had been slashed.

I was driving the good convertible, too, and they were near-new tires. I expressed my feelings at some pungent length, ending with: "Fine neighborhood you've got here, Professor!"

"We're socially and economically underprivileged," he said. "You should make allowances, John."

"You don't really mean that."

"No, I don't. Normally your car should be safer here than among the habitually mean and greedy folk where you live. I think this is someone's not-overly-subtle way of suggesting that you get the hell home and mind your own business."

"My God," I said. "I just got here! How could they know what I'm up to?"

"I knew," he told me. "You're a notorious character, John. Your penchant for meddling when your friends are in trouble is well and widely known. It's just possible that somebody was watching for you."

"If they're that thorough, old Jim must have had a real mountain by the tail. A live volcano."

"I'm beginning to think so, too. Well, come on. I'll take you upriver in the dinghy."

We learned later the tire slashing must have been done out of pure boredom by some teenager. That's how easy it is to be wrong in the sherlock business.

WE WENT ABOUT three miles upstream and into the South Fork in Jersey's fourteen-foot skiff with the five hp outboard motor. The water here was slow and dark, the banks mainly overgrown with a tangle of crimson Turk's cap, hard-berry vine, head-high grass and a gaggle of prolific weed-trees. The channel was kept deep and weed-free to accommodate the sand barges. Their destination was a deep lake a couple of miles further in where the sand was cleaned or sorted or whatever they did to it.

Boats were tied up along the banks ranging from stripped WW2 landing craft and swamped skiffs to a rusty hulk of a Jamaican registry freighter.

Jersey nosed us up to a decrepit little pier to which a lapstrake Bahama sailing dory and—of all things—a twelve-foot dugout canoe were tied. The upstream side of the little pier was half caved in. It looked as if some heavy craft had hit it a good wallop not so long ago.

"Old Jim's landing," Jersey announced needlessly.

"I always thought he lived in a boat."

"That's what he wanted people to think. It kept them off his back."

There was a trail through the near-solid green jungle and we followed it back about forty yards to a neat, small, grey painted frame house in a clearing. The door wasn't even locked. With the place so isolated any lock would only have presented a minor challenge to prowlers.

I should explain here that this section of land had so far escaped the ruinous attentions of our "developers." A road which had once been paved trailed the river about one hundred yards in-shore. A couple of junk yards, an old-car dump, and a sheet iron fabrication plant perched on the higher spots. There were a few ancient frame and corrugated iron houses, a couple with vegetable patches adjoining. Most of the area was so low and swampy that extensive fill would be needed to make any house building possible.

Coontie's house sat all by itself in a hand-hewn clearing. There was no electric line coming in, and only a single cold water tap in the kitchen. Everything in the place was older than time and spotlessly clean. Otherwise the interior was a shambles.

At least three or four men had been searching for something. The mattress had been slashed and the ancient overstuffed chair stripped to the bare springs. A sack of flour and another of rice had been emptied out on the kitchen floor. An axe had cut out part of the wall in the plastered front room. Even a very old and faded daguerrotype photo had been thrown off the mantel and sharded by boot heels.

"Somebody beat us to it," I said tritely.

"I was afraid they might have, John. Could it have been the sheriff's people?"

"No," I said. "It couldn't. Those boys play rough at times but they'd never wreck a place the way this one has been worked over. I wonder if they found it?"

"If they didn't, I don't think we will. If they did, I know we won't. It might be well to get out of here, John."

As we stepped onto the plank stoop outside the rifle bullet came down like a diving hornet and cut sleeve cloth as it passed just between my left arm and body. An inch difference would have drawn blood.

The big .45 Colt's New Service was out of its belt holster before I could drop to one knee. To come at that sloping angle, the shot had to originate somewhere in the green column of a big live oak which reared out of the brush fifty yards away and overlooked the clearing.

I let my left hand grasp the right wrist, cocked the hammer with my right thumb, and loosed off a shot into the greenery. Of course, there was nothing to aim at, but I wanted to give him something to spoil his aim, whoever he was. I was lucky.

There was a scattering of leaves and twigs where the 300-grain hollow-point slug cracked a branch, and then a great shaking of foliage where somebody scrambled down on the far side of the trunk.

Jersey and I ran for the path to the landing. I made him run ahead while I squatted in the brush to bushwhack anyone stupid enough to follow us. Nobody did. Instead I

heard, very faintly, the noise of an old car starting up on the road. I relaxed then and went on down to the skiff.

The professor had the outboard already idling. We swung out into midstream and went on downstream with the slow current to help us along.

"Now what?" he asked in a low voice.

"Somebody," I said, "is just begging for it. A real death wish he has — and Johnny's here to oblige. He owes me for four tires and a torn jacket. Mostly he owes me for Coontie Jim. I'm about to collect."

"It would be safer to just go on home, John."

"I have never played it safe," I said. "You know this has got to be done, professor."

He sighed. "I suppose it does, my windmill-tilting hidalgo. At least it has to be tried. Any ideas?"

"If they'd found what they were after," I said, "there'd have been no point in shooting at us. That means we might still find it first. Whatever it is, it will tell us why Coontie was killed and make figuring out who knifed him a lot easier."

"It would help if we knew what we were looking for."

"What's the matter? You want the world made easy or something?" I said. "Just thank your lares and penates that we know it's a thing. If all he'd had was knowledge of some sinful thing, it would be gone forever in his dead brain."

"That would be safer for us, I think," he said.

Back at the boat I walked up to a pay station and phoned the Three A's truck to bring me down a new set of tires and put them on. Then I drove the car down to the fish house parking slab and spoke to the foreman. They were open all night dressing the day's catch, he said. Somebody would keep an eye on the convertible for me. I gave him fifty dollars to make sure.

He gave me a twenty-gallon bucket of unused ice chips so Jersey and I wouldn't have to drink warm beer. Before leaving I got an extra box of .45 cartridges out of the car trunk. The professor had stuck an old Browning .380 ACP under his shirt when we got back.

By that time it was late afternoon and a westering sun was turning the dirty water to hammered gold. "You stay here, John," the professor said. "Lily will cook for us when she gets off work." Lily was his common-law wife of the moment. She waited tables in a downtown place.

I'd expected to stay, but I made the gesture. "That might be dangerous for you."

"If a mere lad like yourself can see this through, I can. Besides," he added, "they've got to know already that I'm in it."

"Thanks for the 'lad,' Little Father," I said. "I was that twenty years gone. Okay. This is a good base."

I'd barely gotten it out when there was a hail from the bank. Lily was home from work with a paper sack of steaks and assorted cans and bottles liberated from the restaurant's own stock. To my surprise she wasn't alone.

Lily was on the far side of fifty with a fine figure, as men used to say. Big hands and feet, big breasts, and a big, warm mouth for talking and kissing. She wore a striped shift dress and the white shoes that mark the nurse or waitress and almost enough makeup. Her hair was in that towering style some women go for these days. She greeted me by name.

The other one was maybe ten years younger. Once she'd been a real stunner. Time and a bit of weight were beginning to show, but she still had the looks and the air to make a man think of beds with pink sheets.

She curved where curves fit the best, and her lips were moist and red and eager. Her eyes were the flat, blue-grey so many southern women have. The mini-dress was a little too short and the perfume a litte too strong. Her hair fell naturally to shoulder length and was dyed platinum white. She was already giving me a speculative look.

Jersey laughed at my expression. "I forgot to tell you Lily had her sister staying with us. Johnny, this is Iris."

On a whim I stood up and took her hand and kissed it, continental style. The flesh burned under my lips and the fingers tightened on mine. The eyes smoldered at me. This one was ready for something.

"Hello, Johnny," she said. "I'm the next youngest sister. The other two are Tulip and Rose. Pa said he wanted a garland."

I laughed. "And well worth a man's trouble to pick," I said.

Under her breath, "And are you man enough, Johnny?"

"Have some beer, girls," the professor said. "I think that this will be a long, hot night."

The women went below and reappeared presently in very short shorts and bright men's shirts with the top three buttons open. In time there were steaks and fried onions, salad from a paper carton, and beer or whiskey to suit. We ate in the

main cabin on deck. The professor explained it made us poorer targets in case our friend of the afternoon stopped by. Nothing of the sort happened, however.

After dinner we held a council of war. Lily was obviously somewhat worried by our story, but Iris was only excited. Her eyes shone and she made chances to put shoulder and thigh against me in sitting or passing.

"Count me in," she said.

"No," said the professor with emphasis. "This will probably be dangerous and we need no excess baggage."

"Please," she said to him, but her eyes locked on mine. "I'm a country girl, I can shoot and swim or row a boat. Besides, you're looking for something, and no man can hide anything from a woman. I may be a baggage—"

"But you'd never be excess," I finished for her. "We'll wait and see." I meant to leave her behind and asleep, of course.

Jersey and I decided to go back to Coontie's house in the dead hour just before dawn and have a try at finding whatever might be hidden there. This time we'd use my car. Unless there were guards actually inside the house, we figured to get in and out safely at such an hour. Inside guards were unlikely, as the sheriff's men might put in an appearance at any time. Still — they might risk it at night. We'd have to see.

We drank and watched TV on a lousy portable set for a while but decided to turn in early. Jersey and Lily had the main cabin below. Iris had been sleeping in the crew's quarters forward, or what would have been that, if there'd been a crew. I put a couple of quilts down on the carpet in the deckhouse.

It was only a few minutes before Iris came up to join me. Neither of us had to say anything. We knew what we wanted.

About four o'clock she got up in the dark and went down to the galley and made ham and eggs and black coffee and thick slabs of rye toast. The professor and Lily were too fur-tongued and hungover to eat much, but I pitched in.

Iris had a man's appetite and matched me all the way. She still wanted to go with us, but I joined Professor Jersey in putting my foot down. I didn't even want to think of that body with a bullet hole.

We checked our guns, took along a couple of flashlights and a hammer and pry-bar, and were away before five. My car was fine tuned so the motor made almost no noise. Nobody challenged us even at the fish house. Apparently I'd wasted my fifty. There was no sign of anyone watching the boat, but just in case, I loaded the professor's old shotgun and .22 rifle for the women before we left.

It did seem a little odd at the time that I couldn't spot anybody watching us after the attention we'd been

getting before. Still, I put it down to hoodlum carelessness or stupidity instead of thinking through what else it might mean. It was a mistake that might have proved fatal.

We parked a couple of hundred yards from the path to Coontie's house in a spot where the brush thinned out enough to get the car off the road and pretty well hidden, at least in the dark.

I got into the brush and did an Indian scout act until I was sure there was no ambush on the path. Then I came back for the professor, and we went on in.

Since the house was perfectly hidden from the road, I thought it was safe enough to light one of Coontie's kerosene lamps. The place was still a mess. I think some of the debris had been reshuffled a bit as if the search had been renewed after we left that afternoon. It was hard to be sure.

"I don't like it, John," Jersey said. "This place should have been guarded. At the very least somebody should have tailed us or tried to follow and stop us."

"I didn't see any sign."

"Neither did I, but there could have been a stake-out across the river or on one of the boats near mine to at least warn them."

"You just split an infinitive, Professor," I said. "Maybe you're splitting hairs, too. I didn't see anything suspicious. Of course, that's suspicious enough by itself. To tell the truth, I don't like it either. Anyway, we're here and we might as well start searching."

"I wish we knew what for."

"So do I. Well, it's got to be one of two things. It might be a paper — letter or incriminating document of some sort. You look for that. Otherwise it has to be an object, a piece of telltale evidence."

"They might have already found it."

"I'm beginningto think so. That would account for our not being followed. There'd be no point to it then. You look for a paper. I'll try an object."

IN HALF AN hour we turned up an amazing collection of litter, the accumulation of half a century of Coontie's life. Muskrat traps and a Bible to be gone through leaf by leaf. Handleless china cups and fancy conch shells and an ancient pepperbox pistol with a broken hammer. All sorts of trivia, but nothing that seemed to have any meaning.

We even found a tin dispatch box full of old wills and deeds and letters with the ink faded yellow. It had been broken open and the aged ribbons binding packets of papers cut. If it ever had held what we wanted, it didn't any more.

Professor Jersey was probing the barrels of the old pepperbox with a pencil to see if one of them held a rolled-up paper when the roof fell in. At least six guns fired in a volley that shattered windows, split the door panel and, by luck, smashed

the kerosene lamp. As a result the second volley was fired blind into a pitch-black house.

Jersey and I hit the floor together at the first shot, but the fools outside made the mistake of still shooting high instead of realizing what we'd be sure to do. Hoods just don't think well in a tight.

It's saved my life more than once. The thin planks wouldn't stop a rifle bullet, and they could have riddled us both by aiming just above sill level. We got our own guns out, but with our noses on the floor we couldn't see to shoot.

It was only a brief respite anyway. The lamp wick touched off the spilled kerosene and little blue flames began to dance along the floor. In two more minutes the tinder-dry shack would be an inferno.

"Time to go, John," the professor yelled in my ear. "Lead on, MacDuff!"

"You lead," I yelled back. "I'm the pro gun here. Those shots all came in the front of the house. Go out the back and run for the river. Get one of those boats at the dock ready to leave in a hurry. I'll be along after I've slowed them down a bit."

He crawled into the kitchen and then out the back door as the front room lit up for fair. I followed a bit more slowly. Triumphant yells were coming from the wall of brush out toward the road.

I cursed myself for a fool. They'd guessed we'd be back and left the way open. That was why nobody followed us. They knew they wouldn't have to. Then they'd waited to kill us until they were sure we hadn't found anything they hadn't. They must have rolled around in the brush laughing at us in there. Well, only a cat tries to drink spilled milk.

"Here goes nothing," I told myself.

I hunched over the rear doorsill and let myself drop to the ground. Then, instead of running for the trail to the river, I scrambled for the near corner of the house.

My timing was good. They'd just remembered the river trail and broken cover to cut us off or run us down. Once more I was glad these were just hoods. A soldier among them would have surrounded the house to begin with.

I shot the lead man in the belly as he ran into the light. The terrific impact of the big slug stopped his body, but the legs kept running. He went down on his back. A second man had too much momentum to stay out of the light.

I saw his face and recognized it, but I couldn't tell from where or when.

He tried to stop and turn and I fired just as he came in silhouette. The bullet went on through at waist level and smashed both hip joints and the pelvic bone.

A .45 with specially stepped-up hollow-point handloads can be just about as hot as a cannon.

I used the interval when they were running away to bolt back across the clearing to the shelter of the brush by the trail. By the time rifles opened up on the corner where I'd been, I was back of a young mahogany trunk.

For luck I put a shot into the blackness where a rifle had flashed. There was a high yelp and a thrashing around to prove I'd made some sort of hit.

By this time flames were bursting through the dry shingle roof and lighting up the whole clearing. Nobody would be fool enough to show himself in that, and those boys would make as much noise as bull rhinos trying to sneak through the brush. I took off for the landing. Behind me random rifle shots still raked and slashed the undergrowth.

Star-shine off the water and reflected light from the fire lit up the river well enough as far as the first bend in either direction. Jersey was in the dugout, holding its side to the rickety little dock with one hand. He'd thrown away the twelve-foot pole on board but kept the hand-whittled paddle. I wished he'd picked the sailing skiff until I noticed it was chained and padlocked to an iron ring.

Anyway, it wouldn't be long until the boys back of me worked up their nerve to come on down looking for us. If they caught us on the river before we could get around a bend, we would have to buy it for sure. The rifles would riddle us.

I grabbed me an oar out of the skiff to serve as a paddle and got into the canoe. It was as skittish as dugouts always are, and I didn't dare move too fast for fear of tipping over. The current took us clear and we got turned and headed down the stream.

We probably would have made it well enough, if they hadn't still been one jump ahead of us. I tell you now, if that night's trap had been as well executed as it was planned, the eels and the slimy catfish would have had us for breakfast.

Whoever set it up must have figured we'd have a thousand to one chance of making the river. Or maybe he thought we might come by boat again like we did in the afternoon. Maybe he just wanted to know all the loopholes were plugged.

Before we got halfway to the

downstream bend an open cockpit speedboat with two men came with a run from upriver. It had no running lights, and one of the men began loosing off a pistol as he spotted us. To make things worse, if possible, I could hear another motor cough itself into life under the bank by the bend ahead of us.

We abandoned caution and drove our paddles deep, trying to swing the dugout broadside and drive it into the brushy bank. Our one chance seemed to be to scramble into cover there and make a stand.

Our efforts made the craft rock crazily. Still we almost made it.

Almost fries no bacon, boys. Halfway around a pistol bullet burned the professor's shoulder. He jumped and over we went. The river water tasted oily and foul. I grabbed for the dugout, to get it between me and the rushing speedboat. That way he wouldn't run me down. With the other hand I tried to pull my gun again, but my wet jacket plastered itself over butt and holster. I couldn't get to it. The professor floundered and yelled beside me.

The speedboat came on, looking as big as a house. Its plastic wind-screen showed blood red from the firelight. Then there was a boom like a cannon, and the wind-screen shattered and disintegrated before our eyes. Someone had fired a shotgun into it at almost point-blank range.

The man at the wheel threw up his hands as fragments and birdshot sprayed his face. The wheel spun crazily. The boat swerved, to miss us by feet, and aim its nose at the bank. As it turned the second man stood up to jump. The charge out of the gun's left barrel blew a hole in his chest you couldn't cover with your hat.

A voice was hailing us by name from the outboard skiff. It was Iris, of course. She'd taken Jersey's shotgun and skiff and come on upriver with the idea of joining in the search.

Not being sure of the directions, she'd tied up at the wrong dock until she saw the flames and heard shots. Then she'd come on up, staying close to the bank in shadow and keeping the motor throttled down. Neither we nor the men in the speedboat had noticed her until she cut loose with the number sixes right in the nick of time.

After tipping us into the river and shipping a lot of water the dugout had righted itself and the professor and I were clinging to its sides. It was too tippy to try to climb in, and too wet to be inviting. We stayed in the water while Iris brought the skiff over and took us aboard. The speedboat had crashed the bank and stove in her bow. The steersman was either dead or knocked out.

When we tumbled into the skiff I tied the bow rope of the dugout to a thwart so we could tow it along.

"There's something wrong about that canoe," I said.

"I think so, too," Jersey agreed. "She didn't paddle right, and in the

water when I was hanging on she didn't feel right."

"You all didn't do anything right, seems to me," Iris said. "You should of brought me along to start with, like I wanted."

"If we had," Jersey said, "you'd just have been in the water with us."

"You think so. I ought maybe to throw you back for the catfish and eels. Ain't either of you got gratitude?"

"I love you, Iris," I said. "You're better than any three other women I know. In a tight you're good as a man."

"I'm good as a woman," she said — and positively glowed.

A long way back we could hear fire and police sirens converging on the blaze at Coontie's. "Now they'll find out where he lives," the professor said.

"You two're so bright I bet you carved your names on a tree for them," Iris said. Nobody bothered to answer that one.

BACK AT THE BOAT everything was normal. Lily had killed a half tumbler of rye and gone back to her bunk. Her snores were rhythmic and peaceful. It wasn't quite dawn as yet.

At the professor's insistence we tied the skiff to the stern of his boat and went on board for another drink for ourselves.

"Reward of a deed well done," Jersey said appreciatively.

While we were still in wet clothes we decided to check out the dugout. Accordingly we brought it under the davits, made fast and hoisted it inboard easily enough. All the way downriver the wrongness of the canoe had bothered me, but I couldn't remember precisely what had set me off. We found out quickly enough when we turned the craft over on deck.

Nailed to the rounded bottom of the dugout, where it couldn't show as long as the craft was upright in the water, was a freshly taken alligator hide. I must have felt it without registering the fact on a conscious level while hanging to the canoe.

Jersey swore at length. "John," he said finally, "this is what we were all looking for, of course. Coontie Jim was no poacher, nor would he kill a 'gator for food. He must have got this from one of the gangs and in such a way that he came to know too much about them and their m.o. That made him dangerous enough to kill before he could pass the information on. It also made it necessary to get back the skin before the cops found it and figured out how he got it."

"And all the while we searched the house, what we wanted was right under our noses," I said.

Iris went off into a peal of laughter.

"Right under your bottoms, you mean. But why'd anybody want a filthy old hide like that to begin with?"

"Genuine alligator hide shoes at seventy-five dollars the pair," I told her. "Belts at twenty-five dollars. Women's handbags and men's wallets. That filthy old hide is worth from eight to twelve dollars a running foot on the black market, depending on grade and condition. How'd you like to have a couple of thousand of them?"

"A couple of thousand? How come?"

"In the dry season in spring," I expalined, "the poachers make their big kill. The 'gators crowd up to the lakes and water holes when the swamp dries up. Sometimes they're so thick they lie one on top of the other. Two or three thousand a year, maybe more, are killed. They are getting scarce. May even be wiped out in a few years."

"Is that legal?"

"Of course not," I said, "but the poachers are organized, and there's only a handful of state wardens for ten thousand miles of Everglades. They go in by airboat and kill and skin the 'gators at night. Then they use the airboats to bring out the raw hides and start them on their way north. The authorities concentrate mostly on trying to intercept those shipments. Loss of the skins by confiscation hurts the thieves a lot more than a small fine or a month in jail for poaching."

"Where do you think Coontie got this skin?" Professor Jersey wanted to know. "You think he found a cache while he went fishing in the 'Glades?"

"No, I don't," I said. "I'm trying to add up what we already know, and I think it makes sense. Old Jim seldom went out any more. Too old. I think they brought the skin to him."

"Down the river?"

"Down the river. You remember the upstream side of his dock had recently been caved in? The way he built it that would take a heavy boat, wouldn't it?"

"Like one of those sand barges," Jersey said.

"On the nose, professor. Just like a sand barge with maybe a thousand raw skins under the sand. Going out to be towed up the coast right under the noses of conservation agents, harbor police and Coast Guard. Nobody notices those barges particularly. The river's full of them. Big laugh.

"Once out through Government Cut they're home free. A ship could take off the skins or they could pick any one of a thousand safe landings north of the state line."

"I see," he said. "The loaded barge hit Coontie's dock while he was near or on it. In the confusion of getting her off, he must have found this skin under the sand and latched on to it, probably sank it under the dock to begin with. Later he hid it under the canoe while he made up his mind whether to blow the whistle on them."

"Right," I said. "Somebody on the river must have noticed him with it and talked. That, or they missed it and figured out for themselves where it had to be. Either way, it was his death warrant and almost ours."

"There's only two things wrong with that," Iris said over her drink. "You don't know that's how he got it. You just guess. And even if he did, you don't which sand barge, do you?"

Inside my head a great white light came on. "But I do know. At least I'm sure I do. It's got to be the *Fat Sally* that hauls them out."

"Sherlock," the professor said, "I've known you to do some crazy figuring that came out right. I have. But this is too wild. How do you pick one tug out of forty on the river?"

"Not by logic, I admit," I said. "I recognized one of the men I shot back there. Saw him clear in the firelight, but at the time I couldn't place him. More important matters to attend to right then. Now I remember. He was one of the three playing cards in the *Sally's* cabin when Fat Sam hailed us yesterday."

"By God, I think you're right, John. That would also explain how they knew you were on the river so fast. They guessed what brought you and planned accordingly."

We all agreed that had to be it. But knowing and proving could be mismatched mares.

"I want the man behind this whole racket," I insisted. "No redneck poacher thought it up or set up the contacts at the other end. There has to be a top man in a business suit to plan and call the signals. He's the one who ordered old Coontie killed."

"By morning he'll have ordered you and I killed, too," the professor said. "That is, if he didn't take care of that detail yesterday. What can we do?"

By then the sun was coming up. We put the dugout back in the river with the hide still nailed to its hull. What better hiding place? Then we decided on a second breakfast while we thought things over. Lily was waked up to cook this one.

In the middle of the meal we had a visitor. He came quietly, in a grey flannel suit, but he carried authority with him. It was Captain Ryan of the City Homicide Division and an old friend of the professor and I.

"You never learn, Johnny," he said.

"Sure I do. What brings you here?"

Ryan laughed. "To ask you to let the police do the job we're paid for. Oh, don't protest. Old Coonie gets knifed. Right away you swarm down to the river. Then we find where somebody staged a massacre upriver. Two dead men in a burnt-out clearing, blood in the brush from the wounded, a hood sitting in a boat with his heart shot out and another scrambling on the bank blinded in both eyes. It's not the work of the Easter Bunny, Johnny."

"You figure to arrest me, captain?"

"Not if I can help it. Why don't you lay off before I have to. You can't be judge, jury and one-man vigilante pack all at the same time. Let us do our job, Johnny."

"Let you," I said. "I'll do better. I'll help you professor, I'm going to level with the Man."

Jersey just nodded. The captain said: "Off the record, boys, this will stay off the record. We already had files on a couple of the bodies. They're no loss to society. Besides, we don't yet know what's at the bottom of all this. That information is important enough so I think I can forget where I got it. If you follow me."

We told him what we knew and how we figured it. He didn't seem too surprised. The captain is good at his job. His reaction was the same as ours. How can we prove it legally?

"I think I know your man," he said. "We've been watching him for other things. His name is Lou Sapphire. He's a criminal lawyer, maybe more ways than one. He owns controlling stock of one of the plants where sand is processed on the lake. Three months ago he foreclosed a note against Fat Sam. At the time we wondered why he bothered. Now I think it all adds up."

"What can we do?" Jersey asked.

"We can't arrest a character like that without proof. And we can't search the *Fat Sally* without a warrant, which also requires something to convince a judge. Legally our hands are tied."

"Yours are, captain," I said. "Johnny Hawk wears no badge. Suppose I can come up with the proof you need?"

I went on to outline the idea I had. "I think it'll work."

"It might at that," Captain Ryan said. "I can't order you to go ahead, Hawk. I can't stop you, either. Maybe we can work together very unofficially."

He made some phone calls to get the information needed to set up the caper. One of his men came down with a very special piece of equipment which I wanted. Then he left to cover his end of the operation.

One of the things he'd found out was that the *Fat Sally* was still upriver. She was due to bring a barge down, leaving the lake about nine-thirty. That would put her at the river mouth right about eleven.

At ten forty-five I was in the lobby of the business tower where Lou Saphire had his office. He was on the twelfth floor, and had a splendid view of river and bay out his windows. A police stakeout confirmed that he was in.

I told the reception blonde, "Just tell your boss it's Johnny Hawk. I'm here on a matter of life and death, both of them his."

She used the phone briefly and then told me to go on in.

Lou Saphire was barbered and curried and back of his desk in a three-hundred-dollar silk suit and a smile to melt butter. He already had an automatic under the papers on top of the desk near his right hand. He didn't get up.

"I'll come right to the point, Lou," I said.

"I wish you would, Mr. Hawk," Saphire said.

I set out to put the needle in and turn it. "Okay, friend. I just dropped by to tell you the jig's up. The game's over."

He looked alert and slightly amused. "What game, friend?"

"The wholesale 'gator hide export business, Lou. That one. I found the hide that Coontie Jim was killed for. That was a mistake on your part. For Jim's sake I gave what I knew to the cops."

"And what do you think you know?"

I took a chance. "I know you're sending the rest of the kill out of here today in a barge towed by the *Fat Sally*. I know you and I will sit right here in fifteen minutes and watch the tug boarded and the barge searched by the harbor police. After that you go to jail."

"You seem to think you know a lot," he said reflectively. "The point is, do you know how you're going to leave this office?"

I took a silver cigarette case out of my pocket and laid it on the corner of the desk. "I know you think I'm leaving with the hoods you told your girl to phone for when she announced me. Just relax, Lou. There's cops downstairs to take them in the lobby."

In spite of himself he let his eyes flick to the gun under the papers on his desk. "What do you really think you've got?"

I tapped the breast pocket of my jacket. "On my way over here I tapped one of the boys who got away last night. I've got a signed statement naming you as the brain."

"You're lying, Hawk."

"Want to bet on it, Lou? Besides Fat Sam will talk in a few minutes. We both know he's no hero. Too many people know about this."

He lit a black Havana cigar while he thought it over.

"You're right," he said. "Too many people know. Well, you can't win them all." He eyed the gun again.

This was too easy. I wanted him to go for the gun. I was afraid he'd wriggle free of a court like a snake in wet grass. *I wanted him to make*

me kill him. So I tried a gambit to rattle him.

I pulled an ordinary road map out of my breast pocket and threw it on the desk and laughed. "You just hung yourself, Lou," I said. "That's all the signed statement I had. The real killer is here." I pointed to the cigarette case. "Here's the real one. It's a mini-recorder, Lou. It's got every word you said."

He was faster than I'd have thought. He got his hand on the gun and the safety off before I could move. Then he lifted it and centered the muzzle on my chest at four-foot range.

"I knew it," he said. "Give me that case, Hawk."

"I'm going to kill you, Lou," I said.

"You're dead yourself," he yelled. "You've tried this once too often, Hawk. The cops will believe you came in here to kill me and I shot in self-defense. Your record will make them believe it. Oh, the rest of the skins are in that barge, okay. I wanted to get them out of my plant and away while I had time. But they'll never convict me on that alone. Without your recorder, I'll get free legally."

"I can take you, Lou," I said. "I can draw and fire before you kill me. Want to say a prayer first?"

He yelled: "You're crazy!"

"You shouldn't get so mad, Lou. It'll slow you down."

Our eyes locked, and I smiled at him. I could take him, and we both knew it. I'm the pro. He was spooked with rage and fear. He saw my eyes smile as well as my lips.

"I'm just about ready, Lou" I said. "You'll have no more chance than old Coontie Jim with the knife at his throat. This is from Coontie and the 'gators, Lou."

Lou Saphire saw his time run out and it broke him. He let the gun drop on his desk and backed a couple of steps away.

"I give up,"he said. "Don't kill me, Hawk. I'll make a statement. I give up."

"I wish you hadn't done that, Lou" I said. "I really wish you hadn't."

I meant it.

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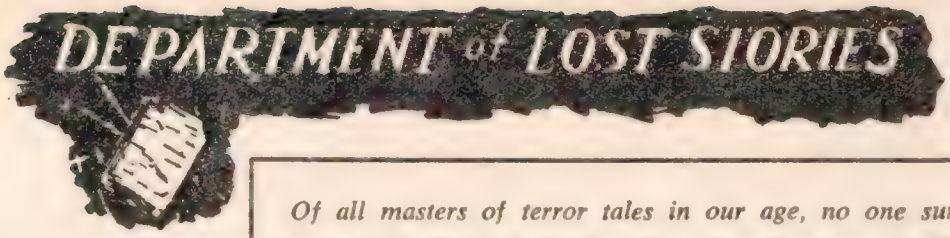

Of all masters of terror tales in our age, no one surpassed Hugh Walpole for sheer macabre power. His stories have a suave, underplayed torment that makes the cumulative effect almost unbearable in its impact. Walpole burst into fame with "The Silver Mask", perhaps the most terrifying short story ever written. Ever since his name has been in the foremost of those who deal out their horror straight — and beware those who are not strong enough to face it! From time to time in this magazine you will see this department. When you do, read with care and discrimination. You will be reading a story which, whoever its author, whatever its length, has been remembered and revered as too good to be forgotten. "Tarnhelm" is one of those stories. Read it. You won't forget it soon.

THE EDITORS

I WAS, I SUPPOSE, at that time a peculiar child, peculiar a little by nature, but also because I had spent so much of my younger life in the company of people very much older than myself.

Now, at the age of fifty, I am a man of very few friends, very much alone, even avoided by certain people. It is because, if you like, my uncle Robert died in a strange manner forty years ago and I was witness of his death.

I have never given any account of the strange proceedings that occurred at Faildyke Hall on the evening of Christmas Eve in the year 1890.

The incidents of that evening are still remembered very clearly by one or two people, and a kind of legend of my uncle Robert's death has been carried on into the younger generation. But no one still alive was a witness of them as I was.

My parents were in India from

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TARNHELM

or, THE DEATH OF MY UNCLE ROBERT

by HUGH WALPOLE

Madman? . . . Werewolf . . . Or figment of a sick boy's tortured nightmares? What was the Thing in the old dark room — the Thing that wanted my reason and my life?

my eighth to my thirteenth years. I did not see them except on two occasions when they visited England. I was an only child, loved dearly by both my parents, who, however, loved one another yet more. They were an exceedingly sentimental couple of the old-fashioned kind. My father was in the Indian Civil Service and in spare time wrote poetry. He even had his epic, "Tantalus: A Poem in Four Cantos," published at his own expense.

This, added to the fact that my mother had been considered an invalid before he married her, made my parents feel that they bore a very close resemblance to the Brownings, and my father even had a pet name for my mother that sounded curiously like the famous and hideous "Ba."

I was a delicate child; was sent to Mr. Ferguson's Private Academy at the tender age of eight, and spent my holidays as the rather unwanted guest of various relations.

"Unwanted" because I was, I imagine, a difficult child to understand. I had an old grandmother who lived at Folkestone; two aunts who shared a little house in Kensington; an aunt, uncle, and a brood of cousins inhabiting Cheltenham; and two uncles who lived in Cumberland. All these relations, except the two uncles, had their proper share of me, and for none of them had I any great affection. Children were not studied in those days as they are now.

I was thin, pale, and bespectacled; aching for affection, but not knowing at all how to obtain it; outwardly undemonstrative, but inwardly emotional and sensitive; playing games, because of my poor sight, very badly; reading a great deal more than was good for me; and telling myself stories all day and part of every night.

All of my relations tired of me, I fancy, in turn, and at last it was decided that my uncles in Cumberland must do their share. These two were my father's brothers, the eldest of a long family of which he was the youngest. My uncle Robert, I understood, was nearly seventy; my uncle Constance some five years younger. I remember always thinking that Constance was a funny name for a man.

My uncle Robert was the owner of Faildyke Hall, a country house between the Lake of Wast Water and the little town of Seascale on the seacoast. Uncle Constance had lived with uncle Robert for many years. It was decided after some family correspondence that the Christmas of this year, 1890, should be spent by me at Faildyke Hall.

I was at this time just eleven years old, thin and skinny, with a bulging forehead, large spectacles, and a nervous, shy manner. I always set out, I remember, on my new adventure with mingled emotions of terror and anticipation. Maybe this time the miracle would occur: I should discover a friend or a fortune; should cover myself with

glory in some unexpected way; be, at last, what I always at this time longed to be — a hero.

I was glad that I was not going to any of my other relations for Christmas, and especially not to my cousins at Cheltenham, who teased and persecuted me and were never free of ear-splitting noises. What I wanted more than anything else in life was to be allowed to read in peace. I understood that at Faildyke there was a glorious library.

My aunt saw me into the London train. I had been presented by my uncle with one of the most gory of Harrison Ainsworth's romances, "The Lancashire Witches," and I had five bars of chocolate cream, so that that journey was blissfully happy. I was permitted to read in peace, and I had just then little more to ask of life.

Nevertheless, as the train puffed its way north, this new country began to force itself on my attention. I had never before been in the north of England and I was not prepared for the sudden sense of space and freshness that I received.

I sat lost and absorbed at my carriage window, and when, at last, long atfer dark had fallen, I heard "Seascale" called by the porter I was still staring in a sort of romantic dream. When I stepped out on to the little narrow platform and was greeted by the salt tang of the sea wind, my first real introduction to the north country may be said to have been completed.

I believe that that first evening arrival at Seascale worked some change in me, so that since then none of the world's beauties, from the crimson waters of Cashmere to the rough glories of our own Cornish coast, can rival for me the sharp peaty winds and strong resilient turf of the Cumberland hills.

That was a magical drive in the pony trap to Faildyke that evening. It was bitterly cold, but I did not seem to mind it. Everything was magical to me. From the first I could see the great slow hump of Black Combe jet against the frothy clouds of the winter night, and I could hear the sea breaking and the soft rustle of the bare twigs in the hedgerows.

I made, too, the friend of my life that night, for it was Bob Armstrong who was driving the trap. He has of-

ten told me since (for although he is a slow man of few words he likes to repeat the things that seem to him worthwhile) that I struck him as "pitifully lost" that evening on the Seascale platform. I looked, I don't doubt, pinched and cold enough. In any case, it was a lucky appearance for me, for I won Armstrong's heart there and then, and he, once he gave it, could never bear to take it back again.

He, on his side, seemed to me gigantic that night. He had, I believe, one of the broadest chests in the world — a curse to him, he said, because no ready-made shirts would ever suit him. I sat in close to him because of the cold; he was very warm and I could feel his heart beating like a steady clock inside his rough coat. It beat for me that night and it has beaten for me, I'm glad to say, ever since.

In truth, as things turned out, I needed a friend. I was nearly asleep and stiff all over my little body when I was handed down from the trap and led into what seemed to me an immense hall crowded with the staring heads of slaughtered animals and smelling of straw. I was so sadly weary that my uncles, when I met them in a vast billiard room in which a great fire roared in a stone fireplace like a demon, seemed to me to be double.

In any case, what an odd pair they were! My uncle Robert was a little man with grey untidy hair and little sharp eyes hooded by two of the bushiest eyebrows known to humanity. He wore shabby country clothes of a faded green color, and he had on one finger a ring with a thick red stone.

Another thing that I noticed at once when he kissed me (I detested to be kissed by anybody) was an odd faint scent that he had, connected at once in my mind with the caraway seeds that there are in seedcake. I noticed too that his teeth were discolored and yellow.

My uncle Constance I liked at once. He was fat, round, friendly, and clean. Rather a dandy was uncle Constance. He wore a flower in his buttonhole and his linen was snowy white in contrast with his brother's.

I noticed one odd thing, though, at that very first meeting, and that was that before he spoke to me and put his fat arm around my shoulder he seemed to look toward his brother as though for permission. You may say that it was unusual for a boy of my age to notice so much, but, in fact, I noticed everything at that time.

I had a horrible dream that night; it woke me screaming and brought Bob Armstrong in to quiet me. My room was large like all the other rooms that I had seen, and empty, with a great expanse of floor and a large stone fireplace like the one in the billiard room. It was next to the servants' quarters. Armstrong's room was next to mine, and Mrs. Spender's, the housekeeper, beyond his.

Armstrong was then, and is yet, a bachelor. He used to tell me that he loved so many women that he never could bring his mind to choose any one of them. And now he has been too long my personal bodyguard and is too lazily used to my ways to change his condition. He is, moreover, seventy years of age.

Well, what I saw in my dream was this: they had lit a fire for me — and it was necessary; the room was of an icy coldness — and I dreamt that I awoke to see the flames rise to a last vigor before they died away. In the brilliance of that illumination I was conscious that something was moving in the room. I heard the movement for some little while before I saw anything.

I sat up, my heart hammering, and then, to my horror, discerned, slinking against the farther wall the evilest-looking yellow mongrel of a dog that you can fancy.

I find it difficult to describe exactly the horror of that yellow dog. It lay partly in its color, which was vile, partly in its mean and bony body, but for the most part in its evil head, flat, with sharp little eyes and jagged yellow teeth.

As I looked at it, it bared those teeth at me and then began to creep, with an indescribably loathsome action, in the direction of my bed. I was at first stiffened with terror. Then, as it neared the bed, its little eyes fixed upon me and its teeth bared, I screamed again and again.

The next I knew was that Armstrong was sitting on my bed, his strong arm about my trembling body. All I could say over and over was, "The dog! The dog! The dog!" He soothed me as though he had been my mother.

"See, there's no dog there! There's no one but me!"

I continued to tremble, so he got into bed with me, held me close to him, and it was in his comforting arms that I fell asleep.

In the morning I woke to a fresh breeze and a shining sun, and the chrysanthemums, orange, crimson, and dun, blowing against the grey stone wall beyond the sloping lawns. So I forgot about my dream. I only knew that I loved Bob Armstrong better than anyone else on earth.

Everyone during the next days was very kind to me. I was so deeply excited by this country, so new to me, that at first I could think of nothing else. Bob Armstrong was Cumbrian from the top of his flaxen head to the thick nails under his boots, and, in grunts and monosyllables, as was his way, he gave me the color of the ground.

There was romance everywhere: smugglers stealing in and out of Drigg and Seascale; the ancient cross in Gosforth churchyard; Ravenglass with all its sea birds, once a port of splendor; Muncaster Castle and Broughton and black Wast Water with the grim Screes; Black Combe, upon whose broad back the shadows were always dancing; even the little

station at Seascale naked to the sea winds, at whose bookstalls I bought a publication entitled the *Weekly Telegraph* that contained, week by week, installments of the most thrilling story in the world.

Soon, though, as I became better accustomed to the country, the people immediately around me began to occupy my attention, stimulate my restless curiosity, and especially my two uncles. They were, in fact, queer enough.

Faildyke Hall itself was not queer, only very ugly. It had been built about 1830 I should imagine, a square white building, like a thickset, rather conceited woman with a very plain face. The rooms were large, the passages innumerable, and everything covered with a very hideous whitewash. Against this whitewash hung old photographs yellowed with age and faded bad water colors. The furniture was strong and ugly.

One romantic feature, though, there was, and that was the little Grey Tower where my uncle Robert lived. This tower was at the end of the garden and looked out over a sloping field to the Scawfell group beyond Wast Water. This tower had been built hundreds of years ago as a defense against the Scots. Robert had had his study and bedroom there for many years and it was his domain; no one was allowed to enter it save his old servant Hucking, a bent, wizened, grubby little man who spoke to no one and, so they said in the kitchen, managed to go through life without sleeping. He looked after my uncle Robert, cleaning his rooms, and was supposed to clean his clothes.

I, being an inquisitive and romantic-minded boy, was soon as eagerly excited about this tower as was Bluebeard's wife about the forbidden room. Bob told me that whatever I did I was never to set foot inside. And then I discovered another thing: that Bob Armstrong hated, feared, and was proud of my uncle Robert. He was proud of him because he was head of the family and because, so he said, he was the cleverest old man in the world.

"Nothing he can't seemingly do," said Bob, "but 'e don't like you to watch 'im at it." All this only increased my longing to see the inside of the tower, although I couldn't be said to be fond of my uncle Robert either.

It would be hard to say that I disliked him during those first days. He was quite kindly to me when he met me, and at mealtimes, when I sat with my two uncles at the long table in the big, bare whitewashed dining room, he was always anxious to see that had plenty to eat. But I never liked him; it was perhaps because he wasn't clean. Children are sensitive to those things.

Perhaps I didn't like the fusty seedcaky smell that he carried about with him.

Then there came the day when he

invited me into the Grey Tower and told me about Tarnhelm.

It was about a fortnight before Christmas. Pale slanting shadows of sunlight fell across the chrysanthemums and the grey stone walls, the long fields and the dusky hills. I was playing by myself by the little stream that ran beyond the rose garden when uncle Robert came up behind me in the soundless way he had and, tweaking me by the ear, asked me whether I would like to come with him inside his tower.

I was, of course, eager enough, but I was frightened too, especially when I saw Hucking's moth-eaten old countenance peering at us from one of the narrow slits that pretended to be windows.

However, in we went, my hand in uncle Robert's hot, dry one. There wasn't, in reality, so very much to see when you were inside — all untidy and musty with cobwebs over the doorways and old pieces of rusty iron and empty boxes in the corners, and the long table in uncle Robert's study covered with a thousand things — books with the covers hanging on them, sticky green bottles, a looking-glass, a pair of scales, a globe, a cage with mice in it, a statue of a naked woman, an hourglass — everything old and stained and dusty.

However, uncle Robert made me sit down close to him and told me many interesting stories. Among others the story about Tarnhelm.

Tarnhelm was something that you

put over your head and its magic turned you into any animal that you wished to be.

Uncle Robert told me the story of a god called Wotan and how he teased the dwarf who possessed Tarnhelm by saying that he couldn't turn himself into a mouse or some such animal, and the dwarf, his pride wounded, turned himself into a mouse which the god easily captured and so stole Tarnhelm. On the table, among all the litter, was a grey skullcap.

"That's my Tarnhelm," said uncle Robert, laughing. "Like to see me put it on?" But I was suddenly frightened, terribly frightened. The sight of uncle Robert made me feel quite ill.

The room began to run round and round. The white mice in the cage twittered.

It was stuffy in that room, enough to turn any boy sick.

That was the moment, I think, when uncle Robert stretched out his hand toward his grey skullcap — after that I was never happy again in Faildyke Hall. That action of

his, simple and apparently friendly though it was, seemed to open my eyes to a number of things. We were now ten days within Christmas. The thought of Christmas had then — and, to tell the truth, still has — a most happy effect upon me. There is the beautiful story; the geniality and kindliness; still, in spite of modern pessimists, much happiness and good-will. Even now I yet enjoy giving presents and receiving them. Then it was an ecstasy to me — the look of the parcel, the paper, the string, the exquisite surprise.

Therefore I had been anticipating Christmas eagerly. I had been promised a trip into Whitehaven for present-buying and there was to be a tree and a dance for the Gosforth villagers. Then, after my visit to uncle Robert's tower, all my happiness of anticipation vanished. As the days went on and my observation of one thing and another developed, I would, I think, have run away back to my aunt in Kensington had it not been for Bob Armstrong.

It was, in fact, Armstrong who started me on that voyage of observation that ended so horribly, for when he had heard that uncle Robert had taken me inside his tower, his anger was fearful. I had never before seen him angry; now his great body shook and he caught me and held me until I cried out. He wanted me to promise that I would never go inside there again. What? Not even with uncle Robert? No, most especially not with uncle Robert; and then, dropping his voice and looking around him to be sure that there was no one listening, he began to curse uncle Robert.

This amazed me because loyalty to his masters was one of Bob's great laws. I can see us now, standing on the stable cobbles in the falling white dusk while the horses stamped in their stalls and the little sharp stars appeared one after another glittering between the driving clouds.

"I'll not stay," I heard him say to himself. "I'll be like the rest. I'll not be staying. To bring a child into it . . . "

From that moment he seemed to have me very especially in his charge. Even when I could not see him I felt that his kindly eye was upon me, and this sense of the necessity that I should be guarded more made me yet more uneasy and distressed.

The next thing that I observed was that the servants were all fresh; had not been there more than a month or two. Then, only a week before Christmas, the housekeeper departed. Uncle Constance seemed greatly distressed at these occurrences; uncle Robert did not seem in the least affected by them.

I come now to my uncle Constance. At this distance of time it is strange with what clarity I still can see him, his stoutness, his shining cleanliness, his dandyism, the flower in his buttonhole, his little brilliant-

ly shod feet his thin, rather feminine voice.

He would have been kind to me, I think, had he dared, but something kept him back. And what that something was I soon discovered; it was fear of my uncle Robert.

It did not take me a day to discover that he was utterly subject to his brother.

He said nothing without looking to see how uncle Robert took it, suggested no plan until he first had assurance from his brother, was terrified beyond anything that I had before witnessed in a human being at any sign of irritation in my uncle. I discovered after this that uncle Robert enjoyed greatly to play on his brother's fears.

I did not understand enough of their lives to realize what were the weapons that Robert used, but that they were sharp and piercing I was neither too young nor too ignorant to perceive.

Such was our situation, then, a week before Christmas. The weather had become very wild, with a great wind.

All nature seemed in an uproar. I could fancy when I lay in my bed at night and heard the shouting in my chimney that I could catch the crash of the waves upon the beach, see the black waters of Wast Water cream and curdle under the Screes.

I remember that now, almost minute by minute, my fears increased. What gave them force and power who can say? I was much alone, I had now a great terror of my uncle, the weather was wild, the rooms of the house large and desolate, the servants mysterious, the walls of the passages lit always with an unnatural glimmer because of their white color, and although Armstrong had watch over me, he was busy in his affairs and could not always be with me.

I grew to fear and dislike my uncle Robert more and more. Hatred and fear of him seemed to be everywhere, and yet he was always soft-voiced and kindly.

Then, a few days before Christmas, occurred the event that was to turn my terror into panic. I had been reading in the library Mrs. Radcliffe's "Romance of the Forest," an old book long forgotten, worthy of revival. The library was a fine room run to seed, bookcases from floor to ceiling, the windows small and dark, holes in the old, faded carpet. A lamp burnt at a distant table. One stood on a little shelf at my side.

Something, I know not what, made me look up. What I saw then can, in its horrid memory, even now stamp my heart in its recollection. By the library door, not moving, staring across the room's length at me, was a yellow dog.

I will not attempt to describe all the pitiful fear and mad, freezing terror that caught and held me. My main thought, I fancy, was that that other vision of my first night in the place had not been a dream. I was

not asleep now; the book in which I had been reading had fallen to the floor, the lamps shed their glow, I could hear the ivy tapping on the pane.

No, this was reality.

The dog lifted a long, horrible leg and scratched itself. Then very slowly and silently across the carpet it came toward me.

I could not scream, I could not move. I waited.

The animal was even more evil than it had seemed before with its flat head, its narrow eyes, its yellow fangs.

It came steadily in my direction, stopped once to scratch itself again, then was almost at my chair.

It looked at me, bared its fangs, but now as though it grinned at me, then passed on. After it was gone there was a thick, fetid scent in the air — the scent of caraway seed.

I think now, on looking back, that it was remarkable enough that I, a pale, nervous child who trembled at every sound, should have met the situation as I did. I said nothing about the dog to any living soul, not even to Bob Armstrong. I hid my fears — and fears of a beastly and sickening kind they were, too — within my breast. I had the intelligence to perceive — and *how* I caught in the air the awareness of this I can't, at this distance, understand — that I was playing my little part in the climax to something that had been piling up for many a month, like the clouds over Gable.

What was beyond any doubt or question was that it was after my seeing the dog in the library that uncle Robert changed so strangely in his behavior to me. That may have been the merest coincidence. I only know that as one grows older one calls things coincidence more and more seldom. In any case, that same night at dinner uncle Robert seemed twenty years older. He was bent, shriveled, would not eat, snarled at anyone who spoke to him, and especially avoided even looking at me.

It was a painful meal, and it was after it, when uncle Constance and I were sitting alone in the old yellow-papered drawing room — a room with two ticking clocks forever racing one another — that the most extraordinary thing occurred.

Uncle Constance and I were playing draughts. The only sounds were the roaring of the wind down the chimney, the hiss and sputter of the fire, the silly ticking of the clocks. Suddenly uncle Constance put down the piece that he was about to move and began to cry.

To a child it is always a terrible thing to see a grownup person cry, and even to this day to hear a man cry is very distressing to me. I was moved desperately by poor uncle Constance who sat there, his head in his plump white hands, all his stout body shaking. I ran over to him and he clutched me and held me as though he would never let me go. He sobbed incoherent words

about "protecting me, caring for me . . . seeing that that monster . . . "

At the word I remember that I, too, began to tremble. I asked my uncle what monster, but he could only continue to murmur incoherently about hate and not having the pluck and if only he had the courage.

Then, recovering a little, he began to ask me questions. Where had I been? Had I been into his brother's tower? Had I seen anything that frightened me? If I did would I at once tell him? And then he muttered that he would never have allowed me to come had he known that it would go as far as this, that it would be better if I went away that night, and that if he were not afraid . . .

Then he began to tremble and to look at the door and I trembled too. He held me in his arms; then we thought that there was a sound, and we listened, our heads up, our two hearts hammering. But it was only the clocks ticking and the wind shrieking as though it would tear the house to pieces.

That night, however, when Bob Armstrong came up to bed he found me sheltering there. I whispered to him that I was frightened; I put my arms around his neck and begged him not to send me away. He promised me that I should not leave him and I slept all night in the protection of his strength and care for me.

How, though, can I give any true picture of the fear that pursued me now! For I knew from what both

Armstrong and uncle Constance had said that there was real danger; that it was no hysterical fancy of mine or ill-digested dream. It made it worse that uncle Robert was now no more seen. He was sick; he kept within his tower, cared for by his old wizened manservant. And so, being nowhere, he was everywhere. I stayed with Armstrong when I could, but a kind of pride prevented me from clinging like a girl to his coat.

A deathly silence seemed to fall about the place. No one laughed or sang, no dog barked, no bird sang. Two days before Christmas an iron frost came to grip the land. The fields were rigid, the sky itself seemed to be frozen grey, and under the olive cloud Scawfell and Gable were black.

Christmas Eve came.

On that morning, I remember, I was trying to draw — some childish picture of one of Mrs. Radcliffe's scenes — when the double doors unfolded and uncle Robert stood there. He stood there, bent, shriveled, his long grey locks falling over his collar, his bushy eyebrows thrust forward. He wore his old green suit

and on his finger gleamed his heavy red ring. I was frightened of course, but, oddly enough, I was touched with pity. He looked so old, so frail, so small in this large empty house.

I sprang up. "Uncle Robert," I asked timidly, "are you better?"

He bent still lower until he was almost on his hands and feet; then he looked up at me and his yellow teeth were bared, almost as an animal snarls. Then the doors closed again.

The slow, stealthy grey afternoon came at last. I walked with Armstrong to Gosforth village on some business that he had. We said no word of any matter at the Hall. I told him, he has reminded me, of how fond I was of him and that I wanted to be with him always, and he answered that perhaps it might be so, little knowing how true that prophecy was to stand. Like all children I had a great capacity for forgetting the atmosphere that I was not at that moment in, and I walked beside Bob along the frozen roads, with some of my fears surrendered.

But not for long. It was dark when I came into the long yellow drawing room. I could hear the bells of Gosforth church pealing as I passed from the anteroom.

A moment later there came a shrill, terrified cry: "Who's that? Who is it?"

It was uncle Constance who was standing in front of the yellow silk window curtains, staring at the dusk. I went over to him and he held me close to him.

"Listen!" he whispered. "What can you hear?"

The double doors through which I had come were half open. At first I could hear nothing but the clocks, the very faint rumble of a cart on the frozen road. And there was no wind.

My uncle's fingers gripped my shoulder.

"Listen!" he said again. And now I heard. On the stone passage beyond there was the patter of an animal's feet. Uncle Constance and I looked at one another. In that exchanged glance we confessed that our secret was the same. We knew what we should see.

A moment later it was there, standing in the double doorway, crouching a little and staring at us with a hatred that was mad and sick, the hatred of a sick animal crazy with unhappiness, but loathing us more than its own misery.

Slowly it came toward us, and to my reeling fancy all the room seemed to stink horribly of caraway seed.

"Keep back! Keep back!" my uncle screamed.

I became oddly in turn the protector.

"It shan't touch you! It shan't touch you, uncle!" I called. But the animal came on.

It stayed for a moment near a little round table that contained a composition of dead waxen fruit un-

der a glass dome. It stayed there, its nose down, smelling the ground. Then, looking up at us, it came on again.

Even now after all these years it is with me again, the flat skull, the cringing body in its evil color, and that loathsome smell. It slobbered a little at its jaw. It bared its fangs.

Then I screamed, hid my face in my uncle's breast, and saw that he held in his trembling hand a thick, heavy, old-fashioned revolver. Then he cried out:

"Go back, Robert . . . Go back!"

The animal came on. He fired. The detonation shook the room. The dog turned and, blood dropping from its throat, crawled across the floor.

By the door it halted, turned, and looked at us. Then it disappeared into the other room.

My uncle had flung down his revolver; he was crying, sniffling; he kept stroking my forehead, murmuring words.

At last, clinging to one another, we followed the splotches of blood across the carpet, beside the door, through the doorway. Huddled against a chair in the outer sitting room, one leg twisted under him, was my uncle Robert, shot through the throat.

On his head was a grey skullcap.

Next Month

Another DEPARTMENT OF LOST STORIES Masterpiece

The Letter of the Law

by LESLIE T. WHITE

Leslie T. White, late great master of adventure novels, was equally famous for his short stories of danger and fast action suspense. This one is ranked among his very best. It is a privilege and a pleasure to present it once more here. It is like nothing you have ever read before. Try it. You'll see!

THE NIGHT IS FOR DYING

by M. G. OGAN

It was a house of horror, peopled by a sadistic monster and a very frightened girl. Could I get in and save her — and get out with my life?

A NOVELET OF STRANGE TERROR

I'D SPENT A week in Baton Rouge working on a phone tap case for a legislator, and I'd managed to find out who bugged his office and home phones. But that was the end of the matter. At my suggestion he turned the case over to local law enforcement authorities. When I got back to my Bourbon Street office in New Orleans my answering service had logged a call from a Mr. and Mrs. George Stratton.

They were staying at the Gulf Coast trailer park over in Gulport, Mississippi, but hadn't left a call-back number. They wanted to see me personally and as soon as possible.

"A Lieutenant Mark Sullivan suggested they call you, Mr. Starke," the girl at the answering service told me.

Sullivan is in charge of identification and the missing persons detail with the New Orleans police. I called him before starting to Gulfport.

"What do these people want to see me about, Mark?" I asked. "It's going to kill a day if I drive over to Gulfport and back. I need that day to catch up with the paper on my desk."

"If you can catch up in one day, my friend, you're lucky," Sullivan said. "I haven't seen the top of my desk for the past two weeks. I've

got a memo here somewhere about the Strattons. Here it is."

There was a pause.

"Their daughter, Dianne," he said, "is married to Porter Fox, the millionaire gun-collecting crank they ran out of San Francisco last year. Maybe you remember the case. He had fifty tons of weapons and ammo in his town house."

"I remember something about it. Didn't he get a suspended sentence?"

"Right. Provided he got rid of

the arsenal and cleared out of the Bay area, which he did. The Strattons tell me he's bought a ranch near Tucson and is holed up there."

"With his wife?"

"Yes. With his wife. They think she's being held prisoner and is in danger."

"But it's only an idea?"

"Well, theres a little more to it, Joe. The girl wrote them from San Francisco that she'd left Porter and was going to file for a divorce in Las Vegas. Stratton set it up with a lawyer out there to handle matters, but Dianne hasn't shown in Vegas. That's one worrisome point so far as her parents are concerned."

"What's the rest of the story?"

"Porter Fox. He inherited several million from his father, and then his younger brother was murdered two years ago. Fox came into a few million more."

"Who killed his brother?"

"Supposedly a burglar who broke into his Costa Mesa home. The guy left fingerprints, so it's a definite, but the man wasn't a burglar by profession."

"What was he?"

"A kill-for-pay bum. What he collected for the job on Porter Fox's brother was a bullet in the head, fired by a person or persons unknown. End of that file."

"You've done some poking around on this."

"I have, Joe. Any man who can collect fifty tons of weapons and ammo interests me. San Francisco police tag him psycho. Their psychiatrist got a whack at him when he was trying to beat the federal firearms rap."

"How are they sure their daughter is with him on the Tucson ranch?"

"She's tried to phone them from there. Twice. Both times her husband cut her off. When they try to call her, Fox tells them to go to hell."

"He sounds like a nice son-in-law."

"There isn't anything more I can do to help the Strattons. That's why I suggested they get in touch with you."

"Thanks for the thought, Mark. I'll get over there and talk with them."

"Let me know how you come out," Sullivan said.

I HADN'T DRIVEN the coast road since Camille struck. A killer storm like that one leaves scars. They bury their dead and build again.

I found the Strattons enjoying the balmy March afternoon outside their trailer. George Stratton was a tall, thin man with smooth-brushed gray hair, a retired banker from Indianapolis. Mrs. Stratton was a sharp-featured little woman with a black hair-dye job.

"It took you long enough to get over here," she said when I'd introduced myself. "Dianne could be murdered and buried by this time."

"Now, Nellie." George Stratton

was used to soothing his wife. "Why don't you fix us tall, cool drinks while we decide what's to be done?"

"Men!" Mrs. Stratton flounced into the trailer.

"She's worried," George Stratton said. "We both are. This man Fox is a depraved individual."

"How did your daughter happen to marry him?" I said.

"She was an airline stewardess. They met in San Francisco three years ago. It was a second or third marriage for Fox, but a first one for our Dianne."

"She's your only child?"

"That's right. We had her quite late in life. When Fox was indicted by a federal grand jury it was a terrible shock. We urged Dianne to leave him then."

"Mr. Stratton, I can fly out to Tucson and get in touch with your daughter. In a case like this that's just about all I can do. If she's reconciled to her husband, that's the end of it as far as I'm concerned."

"I understand your position," George Stratton said. "When can you leave?"

"Tonight. I should have some word for you by tomorrow night. I don't work cheap."

"A good workman is worth his hire," George Stratton said. "Here comes Nellie with our drinks."

"Nell was a good bartender if you like a Tom Collins that's strong on the gin.

"I want my little girl out of the hands of that monster," she said. From the glassy look in her eyes I suspected Nell had tossed down a couple of jiggers while George Stratton and I talked. "I want her rescued."

"Now, Nellie." George Stratton sipped his drink. "It's possible we're more concerned about Dianne than we should be. After all, we're not living in the Middle Ages."

"Does Porter Fox know that?" Nell took a long swallow of her drink. "Enough gin?" she asked me. When I nodded she tossed another question. "Do you know what he calls his ranch?"

"No, I don't, Mrs. Stratton."

"The Keep! You know what that means, don't you?"

I nodded, but Nell proceeded to tell me. "It's the place in a castle where people under siege make their last stand."

"It's possible everything is all right with your daughter," I said. "Married couples fight, separate, and then make up. It happens all the time. Parents and their friends get caught in the fallout."

"Men!" Nell sniffed and glared at me. "You can take a mother's word everything is *not* all right with my Dianne. She'd never worry her mother this way if she could help it."

"I promise I'll be in touch with your daughter, Mrs. Stratton. Do you have a picture of her?"

From the trailer Mrs. Stratton brought me two pictures. One was Dianne's graduation photo when

she'd completed airline hostess school. I studied a really beautiful young woman with a perky smile.

The other had been taken in front of a Las Vegas wedding chapel. It was a flash picture taken at night. *My new husband.* The words were written across the bottom of the picture in a girlish scrawl.

Porter Fox was a tall, handsome man, with a razor-cut and addicted to mod clothes. He'd posed himself dead center in the picture with Dianne peering around his right shoulder.

The expression on his face wasn't that of a happy bridegroom. It could have been the information Sullivan had given me about Porter Fox, but there seemed to be a cruel twist to his grin.

Both George and Nell Stratton were watching me as I studied this second picture.

"I won't need to take these with me," I told them.

Nell Stratton took the wedding photo and tore it twice across. Pure hate was reflected in her face.

"If he's hurt Dianne, Mr. Starke," she said, "I want you to kill Porter Fox."

"Now, Nellie." George Stratton was distressed. "Mr. Starke is a reputable private investigator. He does not go around killing people."

Nell finished her drink. "I suppose not." Instead of hate, for a momene I glimpsed misery in her face and eyes. "Do you want a refill, Mr. Starke?"

Nell's wavering smile apologized. Suddenly I was on her side.

"No, thank you," I said. "I'm driving and you make a pretty husky Tom Collins."

We rose and George Stratton shook my hand.

"We want to thank you for coming over here," he said. "You can very well understand our concern, can't you?"

"Yes, I can," I said, "and you'll be hearing from me."

THE EARLY EVENING flight to Tucson wasn't hijacked to Cuba or anywhere else, so we made a routine landing at the airport outside Tucson. I rented a car and checked into a downtown hotel.

Sullivan was a solid cop. I reviewed my phone conversation with him about the Strattons and Porter Fox. Because Fox was involved he'd taken time he couldn't afford from regular duties to make inquiries. And then he'd put the matter in my hands.

Sullivan knew me well. If Dianne Porter was in trouble he could be certain I wouldn't get off the case until I found that out; then did something about it.

Sullivan considered it entirely possible that she was in need of outside help.

Nell Stratton was probably a meddling woman, but she was a worried one, too. George Stratton was more concerned than he wanted to show.

I'd promised a report by tomorrow night. If Porter Fox didn't want me to talk to his wife that would take some doing. My hunch was it wasn't going to be as simple as knocking on the front door out at *The Keep,* and saying, "I'm Joe Starke. May I talk with Dianne? Her parents sent me."

Yet sometimes the open and direct approach pays off. I'd drive out to *The Keep* and try it in the morning. If Porter Fox wasn't keeping his wife a prisoner, I'd get to see and talk with Dianne. Maybe.

Should he slam the door in my face, there would be other ways. The only trouble with those "other ways" was that I'd be stepping between a man and his lawful wife. If Porter Fox was only slightly psycho, and with the yen he had for keeping himself supplied with lethal weapons, that could be fatal.

A .38 police special was in my luggage, and a permit to carry it anywhere in Louisiana was in my billfold. I could probably get permission to carry a concealed weapon in Arizona if I went through channels, but decided against it. Sometimes an unarmed man can avoid a shooting confrontation that an armed man can't.

I had a sound night's sleep.

The Keep was at the end of a winding desert road, northeast of Tucson in the foothills of the Santa Catalina mountains.

It was a rambling two-story structure built of adobe brick, surrounded by a six-foot wall. Iron gates hung loosely open where the road became a driveway. I slowed the car to a crawl as it entered the driveway.

Mountains were a splendid background for the house. Sun glinted on windows so they stared like sightless eyes. Now I was closer to it, I realized no architect in his right mind had planned this house. It looked as if a mindless giant playing with adobe brick cubes had put it together. After splashing his handiwork with pink paint, now faded by the sun, the idiot giant had lumbered away.

The Keep. A new sign to the right of the driveway proved Porter Fox ownership, and that Nell Stratton had the ranch name right.

From the moment I passed through the gate I had a feeling of being watched from the house. Yet when I'd parked the rented car, and used the knocker on the front door, only echoes from within the house answered.

There were no hurried footsteps, no other sound of movement.

I rapped with the knocker again.

"You selling anything, man?"

I spun around when the lazy, hoarse voice spoke behind me. He was a black-bearded apparition with hair spilling around his bare shoulders, wearing skin-tight denims and a loose sheepskin vest. The red slit of his mouth grinned through the tangle of his beard.

"We ain't buying nothing you'd be selling, man." This wasn't Porter Fox scratching at the black mat on his bare chest.

The creak of the door opening turned me back. "Cool it, Cal." Those flat eyes I'd noticed in his wedding picture inspected me. "What do you want?"

"You're Porter Fox?" There was no movement in the dark hallway behind him, but I sensed someone was there. Someone waiting, listening, and who was perhaps afraid?

Porter Fox wore a trim blue coat with brass buttons. A white scarf muffled his throat. I hoped his right hand was in the pocket of that coat to clutch a favorite pipe.

"What kind of fuzz are you," he asked, "and do you have a warrant?"

Cal had moved away and around the corner of the house, walking on the balls of his bare feet.

"I'm not fuzz, Mr. Porter." I tried a friendly grin but got nothing back from his expressionless face. "I'm a friend of Dianne's mother and father. They've asked me to stop by. Is she here?"

Still no expression crossed his face. His skin was tight across his cheekbones. The corners of his thin-lipped mouth habitually turned down.

"My name is Joe Starke." I put out my hand.

Porter Fox ignored the gesture, but stepped back to open the door wide.

"Come in," he said.

It was a cool day outside. Stepping into that house was like entering an oven! The central heating must have been turned all the way up.

"Wait in there, Starke." Porter Fox gestured listlessly with the hand that wasn't buried in his pocket. 'I'll bring her down."

Through the archway and down two steps I found myself in a gloomy living room. There was a dusty stone fireplace, and clumsy furniture that looked uncomfortable. I tried a chair, and it was.

I moved over to stand with my back to the fireplace, where I could see through the archway into the front hall. Heat hung in that house as if it were warm fog, and I began sweating.

Who was the Neanderthal Porter Fox addressed as "Cal?" A watchdog, certainly. But Porter Fox should be able to afford a better specimen.

"Mr. Starke?" She stood framed in the archway, hands clasped in front of her and wearing a white

robe of some kind that swept the floor.

Porter Fox was behind her, but watching me over her shoulder.

"You probably don't remember me, Dianne," I said. "I visited your folks just the other day, in Gulfport. They're fine and they send their love." She was leaning toward me slightly, listening with her head half-turned.

I could see her face plainly now. It was gaunt and had a feverish look. "They asked me to stop by just to see if you're all right."

"I don't remember you." She spoke slowly, and with the hesitance of a child.

"Tell the man, Dianne."

"I want Mum and Dad to stop interfering in my life. I want you to tell them that for me. I love my husband."

"So you see how it is," Porter Fox said.

"I love my husband." Dianne spoke in a mechanical voice. "I want Mum and Dad to stop interfering in my life. I love my husband." It was hard to recognize in her pale and haggard face the girl with a perky smile. "I want you to tell them that for me."

From where he stood Porter Fox couldn't see the prayer gesture she made with her clasped hands, the appeal for help in her eyes.

Porter Fox seized her shoulder. "You've said enough to the man, Dianne." He turned her and she swept out of sight without a backward glance. "Maybe you've heard a man's home is his castle?" he said to me.

Porter Fox stood with his head slightly cocked, as if he was listening to and approving the sound of his own voice. "Dianne hasn't been well lately, Starke."

"I can see that." I also saw it wasn't a favorite pipe in his coat pocket. When he removed his hand it clasped a Walther P38 automatic. "Does she have a doctor?"

Porter Fox didn't point the weapon at me; he held it down by his thigh. "I can afford the best," he said. "Now you'd better leave, Starke."

"I had it in mind." I moved directly toward him. Porter Fox stepped aside just in time to let me through the archway. "I've found out what her parents want to know," I said. I moved sideways toward the front door, staring directly into his flat eyes. "You keep this house pretty hot."

Porter Fox's eyes wavered. My last remark confused him, but barely enough. He was still debating whether to use the gun.

I grinned at him. "Too much heat could be unhealthy, Fox."

"I like it hot."

I had the door open.

Porter Fox shivered. "You're letting in a draft, Starke. Clear out."

"Sure." I closed the door behind me and let out the breath I'd been holding in.

Cal was standing by my rented

car. His ape grin wasn't friendly. I caught the scent of him as I approached.

"Mind moving a bit to windward?" I said.

"I need a lift to Tucson, man."

"Some other time."

Cal still blocked me from the car. "Are you fuzz after Foxie?"

"Maybe. Cal, you really do stink."

"I work at it." He'd been sizing me up.

"Will you move, or do I move you, Cal?"

"Man, don't get hard." He slouched away from the car. "I don't want to break you up."

"Well, thanks, Cal." I got behind the wheel. "Do you want to tell me what's really going on here?"

Cal knitted his black eyebrows in a scowl. "It's a scene you shouldn't have made."

I started the car. "I make it a bad scene. See you around."

ON THE WAY BACK to Tucson, I considered my interview with Fox and Dianne, also the implication of the overheated house. Drug addicts have low metabolism and are always cold. I was certain Porter Fox was on a drug trip.

I couldn't be sure about Dianne. Her clasped hands had appealed for help. The woman was his puppet.

Others besides Cal, Porter Fox and Dianne had to be holed up at *The Keep*.

It was the middle of the afternoon when I got back to my hotel. I stretched out on the bed, hands clasped behind my neck.

My problem was to manage a private conversation with Dianne Fox. I couldn't immediately see any easy way to manage such an interview.

I phoned Sullivan to find out who he'd talked with in San Francisco and Costa Mesa, getting background information about Porter Fox. When you can't immediately push an investigation straight to a conclusion, working around its edges may help.

"I'm convinced Porter Fox is up to something," I told Sullivan, when he'd given me the names I needed, "and if she isn't locked into it with him, Dianne Fox could be in bad trouble."

"Can't you get help from Arizona law?" he asked.

"Not yet. I don't know enough."

When I'd finished talking with Sullivan, I called the number George Stratton had given me. The manager of the trailer court called him to the phone.

"I've talked with Dianne and her husband," I said. "That's about all I can report so far, Mr. Stratton."

"Is she all right?"

"I can't be sure yet. Does your daughter use drugs?"

"No," Stratton said. "At least, not to my knowledge. She never did. It's been a long time since we've seen her, you know."

"You wouldn't know if Porter Fox is strung out, would you?"

"Strung out? I don't understand?"

"On drugs. Something Dianne wrote or said to you or Mrs. Stratton might be a clue."

"It's never occurred to me," he said. "Mrs. Stratton is here. Let me ask her."

"I'll hold on."

It was Nell Stratton who spoke next.

"It wouldn't surprise me if Porter Fox is a drug addict," she said. "It wouldn't surprise me at all. He's capable of anything. What are you doing to help Dianne?"

"All that I can, Mrs. Stratton. I'll keep you and your husband informed."

As soon as I broke the connection with Gulfport, my room phone rang. "I made it in without a lift from you, man." It was Cal's husky voice. "You're not exactly a friendly type, are you, Starke?"

"Sometimes I am. It all depends."

You learn to recognize the opening gambit that a prospective informer uses. He talks trivia while making up his mind, or screwing up his courage.

"We need to make a meet," Cal said.

"Do we? Why?"

"I've got something to sell."

"Lots of people have."

"Sure, man, youre right. We sell or we buy. It makes the world go around, right?"

"Sometimes it helps."

"Are we in business?"

"I'd have to see the merchandise first."

"Sure, man, but I'm too freaked to walk into the lobby of a square joint. Why don't you come to me?"

"I might not get back to this square joint all in one piece. Name a public place where we can talk."

"There's a bus station down the street two blocks from your hotel."

"I'll meet you at the lunch counter." I glanced at my watch. "In an hour."

"Look, man, I can't wait that long. I have a lift back to *The Keep.*"

"I'll drive you back."

I could hear Cal breathing while he thought.

"If it's got to be an hour from now, all right," he said. "It gives me time to take a bath."

"Now that," I told him, "is a good idea."

I placed a call to San Francisco. Dropping Mark Sullivan's name got me nowhere. They were giving out no information on Porter Fox.

The police in Costa Mesa were more cooperative, because the investigation of Harold Fox's death, as well as that of his assassin, was still an open file. One of the detectives still assigned to the case, Leon Remudo, talked with me. But not before he'd checked my credentials with Sullivan in New Orleans.

"We know Harold Fox was afraid of his brother," Remudo told me. "He spoke about it with his neighbors. Once he called a couple of our detectives out to his house. There had been an attempted break-in. Harold Fox claimed his brother was behind it."

"Did you bring in Porter Fox for questioning after the murder?"

"He came in voluntarily. I questioned him myself. That was after we'd located the triggerman dead. The case stinks."

"I can smell it from here."

"Porter Fox had an alibi for both killings, of course. He brought his wife in with him."

"She corroborated his alibi?"

"Naturally. They were both home in San Francisco when Harold was killed, and when the triggerman got his in a bar parking lot over in Richmond. Their chauffeur backs them up. He's a character named Dixon George Calvin."

"Heavy-set, with long black hair and a beard?"

"Heavy-set, black hair, but no beard and he had a haircut the last time we saw him. We ran a make on all three of them."

"What showed?"

"I guess you know about Porter Fox's trouble with the federals. Maybe you don't know he's suspected of gun-running to some of the more militant groups we have around these days. No proof, but it's a strong possibility."

"How do you figure him?"

"Crazy as a fox, if you'll forgive the pun. A really cold-blooded S.O.B."

"How about his wife and the chauffeur?"

"She's clean. Calvin has a couple of priors for drug possession, and one for statutory rape that was dismissed for lack of evidence. He isn't really dirty compared to some of the characters we haul in these days. But I figure him as a mean customer."

"Did Porter Fox call him Cal?"

"I believe he did," Remudo said. "What are you working on down there?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe nothing."

"There's one other thing we dug

up on Porter Fox. We got this talking with one of his former wives. She called him a sex maniac.' '

"Did she go into detail?"

"Yeah. He's a sadist, according to her, and she's got scars to prove it."

"Thanks for the help, Remudo," I said.

"Any time, Starke. Bitching about Porter Fox helps relieve my frustrations. I don't like to see a man get away with murder twice."

"You're pretty sure he killed the triggerman he'd hired to kill his brother, aren't you?"

"Let's say he's my prime suspect. But he's out of Costa Mesa and the state, so what the hell?"

When I'd finished talking with Remudo I had half an hour left before I was to meet Cal at the lunch counter in the bus station. I dug my .38 out of my luggage and a special ankle holster. A shoulder-holstered gun is too obvious. One strapped above the right ankle is better concealed and as easy to draw fast.

I checked the .38's load, put a drop of gun oil on the hammer and trigger mechanism.

I doubted Cal was ready to bug-out on Porter Fox. You get a feeling when a case is about to climax, or take a dangerous twist. I had that feeling now.

The bus station was crowded. Sleepy people were waiting for buses to take them somewhere; others waited for someone to arrive from somewhere else. There was the usual gaggle of red-eyed and irritable kids.

All bus stations smell of exhaust gas, people, stale food, cigarette smoke, and disinfectant. This one was no exception.

Cal was slouched on a stool at the lunch counter with crumbs from the ham sandwich he was eating in his beard. I took the empty stool next to his and ordered coffee.

Cal had finished his sandwich. "What took you so long, man?" He pushed away the empty plate and jabbed a finger at his empty coffee cup when the waitress brought mine. "Waiting isn't my bag," he said, when she'd refilled his cup.

"I'm on time. I told you it would be an hour. I had some phone calls to make."

"Checking up on Porter Fox?"

"You, too."

"That's not friendly."

"We're not friends."

"What did you find out about me?"

"You're Dixon George Calvin."

Harsh laughter exploded from Cal. It blew some of the crumbs out of his beard. "How's that for a stupid name to give a kid?"

"Your mother probably had her reasons. Let's quit stalling. What information do you have for sale?"

"I know why you came out to *The Keep.*"

"That's the kind of information you want to sell? Try again, Dixon George."

"Keep it Cal."

"If that name makes you happier. Come to the point, Cal."

"Her old man and old lady sent you, didn't they? They're sweating, I mean. You said it's a bad scene at *The Keep*. They know it."

"How bad is the scene, Cal?"

"I'm not as heavy as I look, man." Cal dropped his voice. "That Porter Fox is something else. If she don't get clear he's going to kill that broad some night." He raised his thumb. "He's got her right under there."

"How do we get her away from Porter Fox?"

"That's where I come in."

"I figured you would, sooner or later."

"Yeah. I can help you get her out of *The Keep*. I'm asking a thousand bucks."

"That's a nice round figure." I paid for my coffee. "See you around."

I strode away from the lunch counter and out of the bus station. Cal caught up with me. "I was putting you on, man."

"Sure."

"Look, drive me out there. Forget the money. I want to help the broad."

"You're breaking my heart."

I was walking fast. Cal stumbled and jolted against me. "Sorry about that, man."

Cal was *heavy* as he looked; clever, too. He'd stumbled deliberately. While I was off balance he'd frisked me for a shoulder-holstered gun. Picking pockets must have been one of his specialties.

I slapped my pockets to make sure he'd only frisked to make sure I wasn't armed. My money and I.D. were intact.

Cal wore the same outfit I'd seen him in that morning, except for boots. I had a hunch there was a sheathed knife in one of those boots.

"All right ,Cal. We'll forget money for the time being. I promised you a lift back to *The Keep*. We can talk on the way."

"Sure, man." Cal was relieved. "I feel sorry for the broad."

"My car's in the lot just beyond the hotel."

"We'll get her home safe. You can trust me."

"I'm glad to hear that. "The tug of the ankle-holstered .38 was comforting. "We'll leave the driving to you."

"Sure, man. Why not?"

When Cal was behind the wheel I slid into the back seat. He peered at me in the rear view mirror.

"You're not the trusting type, are you, Starke?"

"I want to be sure both of us arrive at *The Keep*. Who's out there besides you, Porter Fox, and his wife?"

Cal started the car. "Nobody else right now."

"Who's expected?"

"You're not." Cal started the car and swung it out of the parking lot. "Foxie thinks you're off his back."

"Don't make any wrong turns," I warned. "I've only driven out there

and back once but I have a good memory."

"Don't sweat, man."

I STARED AT his shaggy neck as Dixon George Calvin wheeled the car out of Tucson and turned up the road toward *The Keep*. There was a last quarter moon but starlight filtering through the clear desert air blunted darkness.

Cal handled the car well on the twisting road.

"I've got a key into the house from the back way," he told me.

"Let's assume Dianne wants out. How do we handle it?"

"She wants out. Porter Fox's fun and games room is on the top floor. I'm invited to the party tonight."

"What kind of party?"

"Foxie is a heavy user of amphetamines, and when he's on a high . . ." Cal licked his lips. "Use your imagination, man." We'd reached a straight stretch of road where it dipped in and out of a steep-walled canyon. "But Foxie talks too much, so he can't let the broad out of *The Keep*. Not now he can't."

Cal had speeded up; now he tramped on the brake. I was poised on the edge of the back seat. The sudden stop caught me off guard. I shot forward and sprawled over the back of the front seat.

Cal pivoted; swung a hard hand-chop to break my neck. The blow missed my spine but numbed my right arm and shoulder.

A frantic kick brought me sprawling into the front seat. I jabbed my stiff left hand at his eyes, and missed, but ducking the blow Cal hit the door latch and sprawled out backwards out of the car.

I scrambled after him. Cal was quick. He was on his feet when I landed outside the car on my hands and knees.

There *had* been a knife in his right boot. He lunged, stabbing at my back. I rolled away but the knife thrust slashed through my coat and shirt to graze my ribs.

I caught his ankle, twisted; threw him off balance enough to get to my feet.

Cal was wary. He shifted to an underhanded grip on the knife.

I backed away, and ducked to draw the .38, but it was gone. Flailing around inside the car had knocked it out of the steel clip. Cal saw an opening and came lunging toward me as I straightened.

I twisted aside, grabbing his knife wrist as he failed to gut me. I brought my knee up against his forearm. The knife clinked against a rock.

Cal wrenched his wrist loose.

He tried to back away, but I stepped in, slammed a fist in his belly, clipped him on the chin with my other hand. Cal was staggered but still full of fight.

He came at me, swinging. I dropped flat on my back and kicked, hard, with both feet. His bellow of pain told me my kick was on target.

Cal was stooped, clutching at him-

self. A hard right and left chop to the back of his neck dropped him. face down. He pushed up from the ground, but the heel of my shoe caught him on the side of the head.

By the time he'd shaken the cobwebs out of his brain I'd found the .38 where it had fallen under the front seat of the car.

Cal came to his feet, but slowly and dazed now.

A stiff-armed push slammed him against the side of the car.

"Do you know a good reason I shouldn't kill you?" I said. I'd moved back so he couldn't grab for the gun. "Who'd give a damn, or even come looking?"

"You wouldn't, man." He was bent forward, his arms cradling his stomach. "You've ruined me."

I thumbed back the hammer of the .38.

"The best way would be to report it and plead self-defense," I said, as if I was talking to myself. "His prints are on the knife, and it's my word, with no witnesses."

Cal collapsed to his knees.

"Don't do it, man." He was pleading. "What do you want from me?"

"Who put you up to trying to kill me?"

"Foxie did. Who else? He knew you wouldn't go away."

"What does Dianne know?"

"About his brother and Pete."

"Pete?"

"Pete Treagar. Pete killed Foxie's brother. We — he paid off Pete with a slug."

"Do you think you can drive?"

Cal had straightened but his shoulders still slumped. "Drive where?"

"Back to Tucson."

"Look, man. I'm in too deep now. Foxie is going to kill the broad tonight. He's waiting to know you're dead."

The beating had instilled animal fear in Cal. "He'll kill her tonight whether I show or not, Starke. You've got to believe me, man! Foxie is around the bend. I knew it when he sent me after you."

"And maybe Porter Fox and Dianne aren't alone at *The Keep.*"

"They're alone. You can trust me about that."

I was in the back seat again. I touched the gun muzzle to the back of his neck.

"And you can trust me to blow the back of your head in," I said, "if everything at *The Keep* isn't like you've said." I hadn't forgotten his pronoun slip when Cal mentioned Pete Treagar. "In a way you're lucky," I told him.

Cal had started the car and was driving slowly. "How's that, man?"

"Porter Fox figured I'd kill you."

"No, it wasn't like that."

"I'm sure it was. You think about it. You hired Pete for him, and managed the pay-off, didnt you? You've forgotten something about Dianne."

"What's that, man?"

"She's his wife. Without corroboration her testimony isn't worth a whole lot in a court of law. With

you out of the way, Porter Fox had it made."

Calvin didn't answer. I watched his face in the rear view mirror. Indecision was mirrored in his eyes.

"My word against yours isn't worth a lot, either," I said.

"Yeah? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You said 'we' actually killed Pete — or you started to put it that way. Who actually did? You or Fox?"

"I don't admit setting him up."

"You already have, friend."

"It's your word against mine."

"That's what I meant," I said. "Did you kill Pete?"

"No. Foxie did. He wanted to make sure. I'll swear to that if I have to." We were approaching the wall around *The Keep*. "I know where they are in there," Cal said. "Foxie is waiting for me."

"What did you have in mind?" I asked. "By now he's seen the headlights."

"I go in and tell him you're dead and buried. He promised fun and games with Dianne before — well, forget that. You follow me in. You're going to need my help to take him."

We'd pulled up in front of the house and Cal switched off the headlights. He half-turned to speak directly to me. "You're going to need help because we're in the weapon business again. Foxie never learns. He's got customers due tomorrow night,"

"Tell you what you do," I said. "Put your elbow on the horn and keep it there."

"Are you crazy, man?"

"We'll find out. Do as I say."

The car horn shattered the night's stillness.

I slid out of the car and moved far enough away from it so I could cover Cal and anyone else who came out the front door.

I was waiting for Porter Fox to step out on the porch. When the horn kept blasting and he didn't, I shifted my stance, saw his silhouette stealing around from the back of the house; called out, "Hold it right there, Fox."

Porter Fox spread his feet, braced, and cut loose with full-automatic fire. I had just enough time to drop while he was swinging the M14 into action.

Aiming at the muzzle flashes, I fired twice. I saw him stagger and drop his weapon. Cal was somewhere behind me. I fired a third time, knocking Porter Fox down, then looked for Cal.

I have grudging admiration for Cal's guts. He'd come out of the car, trying to take me from behind, but Porter Fox's burst of fire had nearly cut him in half.

When I was sure there was nothing I could do for Cal, I went to Porter Fox. There was nothing I could do for him, either. I'd hit him twice in the chest and once through the face.

I holstered the .38 and the barrel was warm against my ankle.

"Now go in there and get her out," I said, talking aloud to myself. "That's what you came for."

For a long moment I stood frozen. Within a space of seconds I'd killed one man, and was responsible that Cal was dead, too. I was in a state of shock as the .38's barrel cooled against my ankle. The fact both men had been trying to kill me no longer mattered. They were dead and I was alive.

I shook out of it, finally. Inside the house I had to shoulder down a door to find Dianne. In the room hung with black velvet and littered with the tools of the confirmed sadist I found her stripped and tied down on a bed.

She was half-insane with fear, crazed by the pain of having been beaten.

I called the police from *The Keep*, and told them to bring an ambulance.

Then I put in a call to George Stratton. I had Dianne as comfortable as I could make her by that time.

"I'm here with your daughter," I said when he'd been called to the phone. "I don't believe she's in shape to talk yet, but she's alive, Mr. Stratton."

"Daddy?" Dianne had picked up an extension phone. "Oh, Daddy!"

I hung up the phone I'd been using.

Mike Shayne Leads Next Issue With —

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The Open Door

by
DINA DONOHUE

Murder has many faces, and one of them was his. But a little blue lamp knew different

I'M A PRETTY old hand at questioning and usually the guilty ones are too pat, too glib. They don't perspire and squirm as much as this kid was doing. A kid named Jim Davis.

"Look, I'm telling the truth. The front door was open," he was saying. "Anyone could have walked in, the same as I did. This isn't any confession, so you can tell that man not to bother taking notes." I didn't like that smart alec crack of his but let him continue in his nervous voice. "What would I want to kill Mr. Parsons for?"

He looked as if he were telling the truth. Still, Mr. Parsons was dead and nothing had been stolen. But the old man might have caught the kid trying to make away with his wallet—that could have been it.

The kid kept mopping away at his forehead. His thin face was pasty-white. Of course, he'd been drinking plenty last night. Parson's daughter had found Davis stretched out flat on the living room sofa this

morning, even before she found her father, all bloody from a beating with a heavy brass lamp. He was in his room upstairs, down the hall from hers. But she hadn't heard a sound, even though her father must have put up some fight.

I asked Jim Davis about it.

"I told you before." He cracked his knuckles slowly and I burned inside, hate that noise. "Mr. Parsons is an old friend. My father used to work with him at his garage. Lots of times, when I have a date, he lets me flop on the couch so I don't have to go home. I live way out on the Island and my dates are always in the city.

"Old man Parsons leaves the front door on the latch for me. Never had no trouble before. Last night, same as always, I just walked in, didn't even undress. Just threw myself on the couch. So help me, I never knew nothing until they woke me this morning."

"Did you know the girl, his daughter, well?" I figured there might be an angle here, if we couldn't prove he tried robbery.

"Sure, she was around lots but I never took her out, if that's what you mean. A real mousey girl. Seventeen, but I guess she never goes out on a date. I talk to her some, maybe even kid her, you know. Fellows all try. But she's a mouse."

It seemed queer, even if he talked all right. This Jim Davis maintained there was no light on in the house when he came in, except for a small light in the vestibule. But the girl found the light still burning in her father's room when she called her father for breakfast and he didn't answer.

Somehow that light sort of puzzled me. I'm not like movie or story detectives, always looking for strange clues. With me, it's the simple, everyday things that ring a bell.

Coroner placed the time of death about three A.M. And Jim Davis couldn't account for his time.

"Sure, I was drunk. I don't remember what time I got in but I was over at Sunrise Dance place with Chuck Sinclair and a couple of girls. They'll know what time they brought me home. I remember Chuck helping me up on the porch. But I never killed anybody."

There were no signs of a struggle, no marks on his face or neck but neither did there have to be. The old man may have tried to fight back but he may not have succeeded in striking one blow. This kid was thin but wiry.

I don't ordinarily like the "I don't remember" routine. It sounds to me like a preliminary to a plea of temporary insanity, blacking out at crucial moment sort of defense. Still, it might be that this kid was just up against a rotten break with circumstantial evidence. Why the heck didn't people learn to lock their doors anyway?

Jim Davis seemed wound up, wanted to talk. I warned him he

ought to wait for his father or a lawyer but he was all for talking.

"I don't need no lawyer. I went to a party, I came here to where I was supposed to spend the night and I opened the door. Maybe someone else saw me open it and followed me in. Could've happened. Maybe he was dead before I even got home. I'd of been too far gone to even remember when I got in. All I know is I hit that sofa and fell asleep."

"Tell me again, Davis, were the lights on or off in that man's room? You'd have seen it from the front of the house." This light was important because if it was on, then he was already dead. The light was on when he was found.

"Look, I told you before. When I came up the porch steps with Chuck I looked to see if anyone was awake. I remember that. There was no light except in the vestibule."

He was getting a little tired now and his eyes seemed to sink back into his pale face. He had said he was twenty but sitting there sweating it out, he looked like a scared sixteen. I sent him outside to wait until I can question this Chuck Sinclair, who had brought him home.

The fellow comes in then and he's young too but has an air of assurance about him. Maybe because he's not afraid. He even starts talking before I can get a question out.

"Terrible thing, Lieutenant. But I don't believe Jim did it. He was practically out on his feet."

Maybe so, but I wanted Sinclair to corroborate Jim's statement. I asked him if the girls were in the car when he brought Jim Davis up to the porch.

"No. We dropped them off first and I brought Jim up to the door. It was on a latch. I opened it by turning the knob and he went in by himself. I left him at the door."

"Did he lock it?" Jim Davis hadn't been able to remember.

"I honestly don't know. Maybe he did. Maybe I closed it. I don't

remember. It could be that we left it open."

"Was there a light on in the house?"

I got the impression that this guy was weighing his words before he answered like he was trying to give the same answers Jim Davis did. He was a good looking young man and I could just imagine how the girls would go for his curly hair and smile. For me, I don't like good looking guys who dress as fancy as this Sinclair—maroon flannel jacket and grey pants with a real leather-tooled belt and he's got matching maroon socks and a little silk handkerchief peeking out of his jacket pocket.

I asked the question again. He was taking too long to answer.

"Any lights on in the house?"

Everything he said had me returning to Jim Davis. Maybe the old man had caught him near the girl's room or maybe he was reaching for the old man's wallet when the old man surprised him. This Sinclair answered my question finally and his answer was straightforward enough.

"Oh sure, there was a light on. In the vestibule right after you open the front door."

"No other light upstairs?" I guess Jim's idea that the man was dead when he returned home was no good. Sinclair was the witness who would vouch for Jim Davis' innocence or guilt.

"No light at all, just the one in the vestibule." And he continued, sort of musing to himself, "No light at all, just a little blue lamp with a funny shade."

That did it for Chuck Sinclair, and good! The vestibule light was an ordinary bulb in a wall bracket. The blue lamp was upstairs in the murdered man's room!

Next Month:

THE DROP

Tale of Nameless Terror

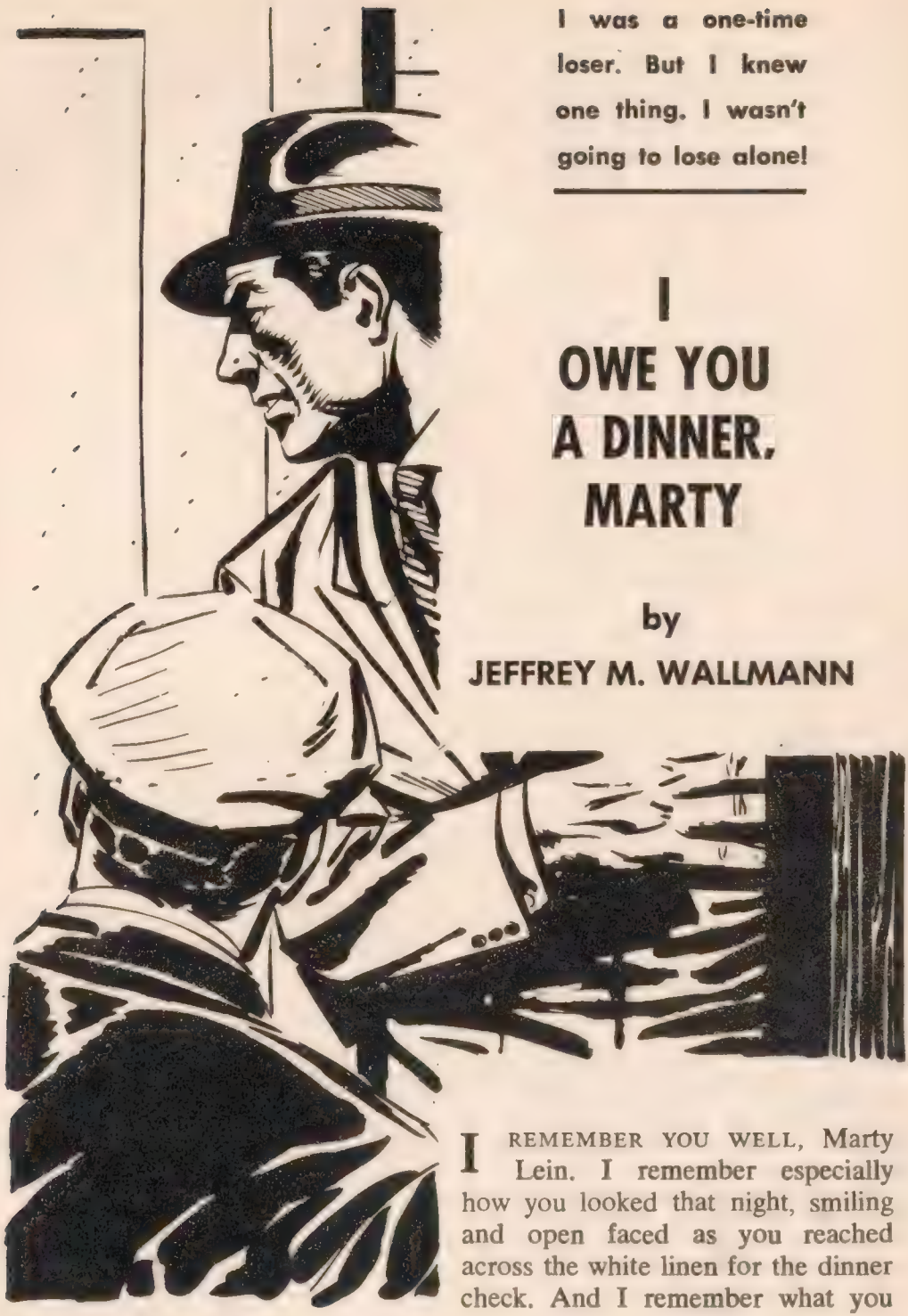
by GEORGE C. CHESBRO

I was a little man in a nest of big killers, and I had some job. All I had to do was break up an international dope ring, save a guy who wanted to die — and somehow find my way back alive! I damnd near didn't.

I was a one-time loser. But I knew one thing. I wasn't going to lose alone!

I OWE YOU A DINNER, MARTY

by JEFFREY M. WALLMANN



I REMEMBER YOU WELL, Marty Lein. I remember especially how you looked that night, smiling and open faced as you reached across the white linen for the dinner check. And I remember what you

had said to me, too, that fine night.

"Jess," you said as you stood up from the booth, "Jess, when this is all over, come back and I'll let you buy *me* a dinner."

And then you had chuckled and placed your hand on my shoulder, because I was the son you'd never had. I had made a mental promise then to do just that, to return and treat you to a dinner, to repay you for being my friend when I needed one.

Then we had walked back to the police station.

The cops had been so intent on proving my guilt, they had never considered I might have been innocent. They'd been working me over pretty thoroughly. Nothing third degree, or at least not too much, but interrogation is rough, especially on a kid barely out of his teens and without parents and unknown in the town.

The representative from Granite Brothers, the big discount store chain, had been there, too. He had been small and sort of oily looking, and kept softly, calmly repeating that I should come clean, that they had me soild, that I should return the $1500 I'd stolen from them.

That had been the problem, remember, Marty? I couldn't return their stolen money because I'd never taken it. They had all thought I had, and there had been circumstantial evidence, for I'd been in the wrong place and the wrong time and no alibi of my own.

I had had the opportunity, the method, and money is its own motive. I hadn't been a local resident, either, but only passing through, and that had been enough for them.

So we had gone around and around for a full day and a half before you'd come to help me, the cops and the rep demanding to know where the money was and me denying I'd stolen it.

Finally they had allowed me my one phone call, only I hadn't known any lawyers. I hadn't known anybody who could have helped me except you, and you were miles away in Manhattan. But I'd taken the chance and had called you, and you'd said stick it out, boy, you'd be right there.

How lucky can a guy get, Marty, having a friend like you? A private detective, and a good one; one I respected and had run a few errands for and was right damn proud to call my friend.

And after a couple of hours in you had come, with your thin, hawk-like features, and your suit wrinkled as it always was, and your hair combed back European style. You had smiled reassuringly at me.

"Tell me about it, Jess," you had said. I had told you then, and you had nodded and understood.

You had talked to the cops and the rep after that, nodding some more. You had turned back to me, saying, "Jess? Jess, if you took the money, you tell me."

"I'd never lie to you, Marty," I'd said. "Not a dime."

Sergeant Convery had called me stubborn then, and he and one of the other cops began the sweet-and-sour technique while you had sat down in a chair at one end of the room and had listened and smoked, and occasionally you had asked a question or two. You had even gotten them to get me a cup of coffee; that's the kind of friend you had been.

But for all the yelling Convery had done and all the nice words the other cop had given me, by midnight it had still been a stalemate.

It had been then that you acted, Marty. You had asked Convery to take me into the next room while you talked to the rep, and then after a while you had come into the room where I had been taken, waited for Convery to leave us alone, and then you had sat down across from me and had put it to me straight.

"You can't get out of this one," you'd told me.

"Marty, I'm telling you, I never could —"

"Hold on, I'm not saying you did. I'm saying that the rep is going to prosecute if he doesn't get his money back. The cops think they have enough circumstantial evidence to nail you."

I had been scared all along, but I had really shook after that. I had been exhausted and very hungry, and I know I had visibly quivered and my voice had trembled and caught in my throat. "Why — why me? Why don't they go out and get the real thief?"

"You know how the cops work, Jess. Interrogation is easier than investigation, especially when they've got one who fits. That's all they care about. But I talked to the rep, and there's one way out."

"What's that?" I had asked eagerly.

"Pay Granite Brothers fifteen-hundred dollars," you'd said, and after a pause to let it sink in, you had continued. "Listen, all the rep wants is his money back. He certainly doesn't want to prosecute you; that's bad publicity. Do you have fifteen-hundred dollars?"

"I — I guess I could ask around and scrape it up. Maybe my aunt in California would —"

"Good. Now, we'll go back in the squad room and you say you can't remember what happened, but that you'll pay the fifteen-hundred dollars."

"But I know what happened. I didn't —"

"Don't be stupid, Jess. They've got to have something to make it look official and on the up-and-up. It's not a confession, saying you don't remember something happening, but if you continue to say you never took it, then they can't accept the fifteen-hundred dollars."

And then you had leaned forward, Marty, and looked me straight in the eye and had been very serious. "Jess, I'm telling you. It's

your only way out. You don't want to go to prison, do you? Have a record and never be able to work at anything except washing dishes in some crummy diner? Do it, Jess. Trust me."

I had trusted you. I had been at the point where there was nothing left except my trust in you.

"All right," I had said, and we had walked back in and Convery had typed up my statement that I didn't remember anything at the time the money was stolen, and then the rep had smiled and all the cops had smiled and you had smiled, and even I had smiled. Because it was so late and I hadn't eaten since breakfast, they had allowed you to take me to an allnight restaurant for dinner.

The dinner, Marty. The one I must repay.

You had left me after we returned to the police station. I thought I was going to be able to go, too, but I didn't. It was then that I discovered that the cops hadn't had enough evidence to charge me with the crime, but that the paper I'd signed tipped the scales and now they did. I screamed double-cross, but they didn't hear me. They booked me and I stayed in jail until my trial, almost a year later.

I pleaded not guilty, and my court appointed lawyer tried his best. I told what had happened in the police station and how I was tricked, and then you were called. You walked to the stand, never looking at me, and you perjured your teeth out. You said you'd been hired by Granite Brothers and that you had been at the station for their benefit, not mine.

You said you never had seen me before in your life. I think the part which hurt the most was when you denied ever taking me to dinner.

You sold me out, Marty. I don't know how much the fee was you got from Granite Brothers or how much the rep promised you, but it couldn't have been more than one-hundred dollars. That was the price of our friendship, Marty; that's all it evidently meant to you.

I was found guilty and sentenced to five-to-ten. I had to make resituation, so I was still out fifteen-hundred dollars, just as if you had kept your word to me. I'm out now, as of yesterday, and you're right, Marty. There's not much an ex-con can do except wash dishes.

But I'm not looking for a job, Marty. I bought a knife, a big butcher knife with a bone handle, and I'm in the elevator of your office building. I'm coming to see you, Marty, because I owe you a dinner.

You're the main course.

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The Only Suspect

by CARL HENRY RATHJEN

Only one person could tell of that kill in the night. Only a girl — long dead.

IT WAS ONE of those sudden spring days when a guy doesn't feel like working.

Keith Ohler closed the folders on

his desk in the insurance office, gave his supervisor the impression he was going to call on some prospects, then headed for home. Later he wished he hadn't, especially when John McCabe, chief of Valley View's three-man police department, tracked him down.

McCabe began that tracking when the phone rang in the one-room station at city hall. A woman's voice shrilled.

"There's a child's body laying in the street on West Madison!"

McCabe managed to keep her on the line until he got the exact location and her name. Then, after radioing Knapperman, who was on patrol, he hurried out to his car.

McCabe and Knapperman arrived from opposite directions. Leaving their cars blocking the street, they met at the limp body of a three-year-old, where two women held back a sobbing girl in green housecoat and pink curlers.

McCabe, a widower with three children, thought of his own youngest when he saw the dark curly hair in a spreading ooze of blood. His gray eyes became cold as he felt for a pulse and failed to find it. He spoke to Knapperman.

"Get to a phone and ask Doc Coolidge if he can come."

Behind him a woman's voice quavered. "Oh, Mr. McCabe, is she gone?"

"I'm afraid so." Looking around, he saw it was Mrs. Wetherington, who sold cosmetics house-to-house and who had phoned him. "Was it you who found her?"

She nodded jerkily. "When I came out to my car and—"

"Came out from where?" McCabe interrupted, glancing toward her car parked about twenty feet away.

"From her mother's house — Mrs. Rankin's."

Young Mrs. Rankin leaned against one of the women supporting her. Her voice was muffled. "Janie was getting into Mrs. Wetherington's sample kit. I sent her out of the room. I didn't know she'd come outside. Mr. McCabe, are you sure she's—"

McCabe spoke to all the distraught women. "Did any of you see or hear this happen? The sound of a car, or just the glimpse of one?"

They hadn't. He suggested that Mrs. Rankin be taken into the house.

Knapperman returned. "Doc's coming." He scowled about at the pavement. "The driver never even hit the brakes."

McCabe nodded. He moved to a faint scuff mark on the black asphalt. But that's all there was. Just a faint smear as though a bundle of rags had been rubbed there. No glass, no flecks of paint, nothing that the crime lab in Allentown, eleven miles east, could use to build back to the type of car that had killed Janie Rankin.

Going in the other direction, McCabe paused for another look at the tiny broken body. Grease, oil,

and dust smudged the little sun suit and bruised flesh. On the pavement beyond there were no signs of tire marks left by a car taking off. Knapperman herded back staring neighbors as Doc Coolidge arrived. Nodding his white head to McCabe, the physician knelt by the body.

"Janie Rankin," he muttered. "I brought her into the world." In a few moments he looked at McCabe, crouching beside him. "She's been gone about twenty minutes, I'd say."

McCabe glanced at his watch. That would be back about two-thirty. At least that was something to work on to find that hit-and-run driver. "What else can you tell me, doctor?"

"There are breaks in the left ribcage, but I'm inclined to think that death was caused instantaneously when her head struck the pavement."

McCabe stared bleakly at the body. Janie's ribs would have been just the right height for impact from a car's bumper. But what car?

"Knapperman," he called. "Ring every doorbell. Find every delivery man or kid who was in this neighborhood around two-thirty. We want to know about any vehicle they saw coming from this area."

By late afternoon they'd found no witnesses who could give even a vague lead. McCabe, ringing a doorbell several blocks up West Madison from the accident site, picked up and opened an afternoon paper that had been tossed onto the doorstep.

POLICE SEEK KILLER CAR
Steiner Promises Hard Line on Traffic Toll

Steiner was an ambitious deputy district attorney. He had announced his candidacy for D.A. in the coming June primaries, sort of jumping the gun that his chief, convalescing from a coronary, probably would not seek re-election.

The door opened. McCabe handed the paper to an elderly woman and asked if she had noticed any cars on the street about two-thirty.

"I've been in the back room making a dress for my granddaughter's birthday. All I can tell you about out front was when I heard the trash collector's truck about two-fifteen."

McCabe found Knapperman working side streets. "I'm leaving the area. Call me if you get anything."

Driving to the east limits of Valley View, he stopped before a trim white cottage with green shutters. Behind the house and partly concealed by tall lilacs was the Plato Sanitation Company truck. Pete Plato had just washed up. He came to the door in a canary yellow sports shirt and green slacks.

"Don't tell me I missed somebody's barrels, Mac."

"I wish it were that simple," McCabe said. "Were you anywhere near West Madison at two-thirty this afternoon?"

"Am I in trouble?" Pete Plato grinned, then, noticing McCabe's

grim expression, he went on, "Two-thirty? That would mean we were hurrying to get off West Eighth before the high school let out the hot rod drivers."

"Before they got out," McCabe asked, "what cars did you see?"

"Mac, I see plenty of cars all day, but I don't keep a log."

"Pete," McCabe explained, "I'm looking for a hit-and-runner who killed a child on West Madison. That street bisects West Eighth. So see if you can recall a car that was going fast."

Plato frowned, then finally shook his head. "All I can remember is I had a barrel in each hand and was going to let a car come around the corner from Madison onto Eighth. But he wasn't in a hurry, Mac. He stopped and waved me to go ahead."

"Thanks, Pete." McCabe turned away resignedly, then paused. Maybe that driver had been taking it slow deliberately so as not to attract attention. "Did you recognize that car or its driver?"

Pete Plato shook his head again. He wasn't sure, but it might have been a gunmetal green. He didn't notice whether it was a two-door or four. Not a luxury job nor a compact, either. It had gone leisurely up Eighth and he hadn't paid any more attention to it.

McCabe went across town to West Eighth. Kids swarmed all over the street on bikes, but faded toward curbs and sidewalks when they spotted the approaching police car.

He thought of Janie Rankin and wished that parents would be as stern toward their kids as they were toward police who ordered them out of the streets. But that didn't absolve the driver who left Janie Rankin laying on the pavement. He stopped the station wagon near a man who was setting a sprinkler.

"It's going to take a lot of water," McCabe remarked, "to keep it that green all summer." His glance swept over cars by neighboring houses. He spoke casually. "Does anyone around here have a green car?"

"Keith Ohler up the street drives —" The man paused. "Am I getting him involved in something, chief?" He's a nice guy. I wouldn't want him to think that I—"

"Whereabouts up the street?" McCabe interrupted.

The man hesitated. "Four doors. Chief, may I ask—"

"Thanks for your cooperation," McCabe said, turning away.

Up the street, in answer to door

chimes, a man came around the side of the house. Somewhere on the far side of twenty-five, sandy hair, plaid sport shirt, khaki shorts, thong sandals. His freckled face showed surprise at sight of McCabe's uniform, then a friendly smile.

"Yes, sir?"

"You're Keith Ohler?"

"That's right. What can I do for you?"

"I need some information, Mr. Ohler. Do you work in Valley View?"

"No. In Allentown. Surety insurance." He grinned. "Do you need some, chief?"

"Are you in the office or outside?" McCabe inquired.

"Both." Ohler frowned. "What's this information you want?"

"Do you drive a green car?" McCabe continued, and got a nod in reply. "May I see it, Mr. Ohler?"

"Sure. It's in the garage. This way. But why, chief?"

McCabe didn't reply, following him around the house. On the rear patio a redhaired young woman in yellow blouse and matching stretch pants turned from a three-legged barbecue.

Ohler spoke. "Watch the steaks, will you, Hon? The chief here wants to see our car."

Though she looked puzzled, she smiled. "Not guilty. I haven't driven since I turned my ankle."

Ohler raised the garage door. McCabe walked inside to the front of the car and asked for a light. Ohler plugged in the extension of a trouble light. All that McCabe could find on the front of the car were a few pebble dents, but they weren't recent.

"Chief," Ohler said uneasily, "if you would tell me what this is all about—"

McCabe got down and thrust the light under the car. He spotted where hard crusts of mud had been broken away, and the greasy bottom of the drip pan looked as though it had been wiped with a piece of cloth, or could it have been Janie Rankin's rolling body? He faced Ohler.

"Mr. Ohler, it is my duty to inform you that you need not answer any further questions, unless you wish, without the advice of a lawyer . . . "

Ohler, gaping, was going to interrupt, but McCabe continued tersely with the rest of the Miranda warning. Ohler's freckles became vivid on a paling face.

"What am I supposed to have done with this car, chief?"

McCabe ignored the question. "What time did you get home?"

For a moment Ohler looked defiant. "Usually it's about five-thirty. Today I knocked off early. Got here before three."

"Exactly when before three?" McCabe tensed as Ohler moved toward the door, but it was only to call to the patio.

"Hon, did you notice what time I got home?"

"Yes, before I got my face on."

"No joking. This is serious."

She put down the barbecue fork and came worriedly. "I'd say it was about twenty to three, but why is it so important?"

McCabe wished they would oppose him, give him reason to be dogged without feeling he was breaking up the happy life of this couple. But was there any happiness tonight in Janie Rankin's home?

"All right," he said curtly. "That time is close enough, for the moment. Now I want to know your exact route through Valley View to here."

Young Mrs. Ohler gasped, was about to ask questions, but Ohler shook his head at her. "I came up Main from the freeway. Stopped to buy a six-pack of beer. Then went west on Madison to Eighth and home." His freckles bunched. "Now before I answer anything else, I think I'm entitled to know why. What's with under my car? Why all these questions?"

McCabe told him. Ohler stared in shocked disbelief.

"Chief, there's some horrible mistake here. I'll admit I came along West Madison, but I did not run down a child!"

"We love children!" his wife cried. "We've been hoping that soon—"

Though they insisted on Keith Oher's innocence, they did not try to evade answering McCabe's questions. Ohler, of his own volition, offered to accompany McCabe to the police station to get this cleared up. Late that evening he still claimed his innocence. Then Mrs. Ohler came with her brother, Emory Mattson, a young Allentown lawyer. He spoke to McCabe while Ohler waited outside.

"My brother-in-law, my client, is rated an A-1 risk, and not just because he works for the insurance company. He's never been cited for a moving traffic violation, never been involved in an accident."

McCabe let him finish, then extended a sheet of paper.

"That's the report from the Allentown crime laboratory. It was specially delivered. The grease, oil, and dust on Janie Rankin's clothes and body check absolutely on analysis with samples obtained from the bottom of Ohler's car. Measurements of her height show that her broken ribs coincide exactly with the height of the car's front bumper."

Young Mattson let his breath out through his teeth. "Chief, you meet a lot of people. You're able to size them up quickly. What is your personal opinion? Do you honestly believe that Keith could be guilty of a heinous thing like running down a child and leaving her?"

McCabe was silent a moment. "I've got three children of my own. I've been leaning over backwards not to let personal feelings intrude on the investigation. That's why I haven't booked your client yet."

The lawyer studied McCabe. "They told me you've been trying

to give Keith a fair shake. Thanks, chief."

But McCabe received no thanks in the morning when Rudy Steiner, the deputy D.A., arrived with a marshal to take the prisoner to Allentown.

"No prisoner," McCabe said. "I haven't arrested Ohler yet."

Steiner bristled like a tailored terrier. "Why not?"

"There are some circumstances," McCabe began.

"What circumstances?" Steiner demanded. "He's admitted he was at the wheel on the right street at the right time when that child was ruthlessly struck down, killed, and abandoned."

McCabe nodded slowly. "At first, I was as incensed as you are."

"Then what's changed your mind? Have you found new evidence? Another suspect?"

"No, he's my only suspect." McCabe frowned. "It's just that—"

Steiner's angry eyes probed him. "Is this guy a friend of yours, done you some favor or something?"

McCabe shook his head. "I never saw him before yesterday."

"Then why the devil, chief—"

McCabe went on quietly, "Let's get one thing straight. I haven't made up my mind one way or the other yet. He could be guilty and he could be telling the truth."

"The truth?" Steiner shook his his head disbelievingly. He lowered his voice to a grim tone. "Let me set something straight with you,

chief. I've already done some checking up on Ohler. He and his wife have been active for a couple of years in the Allentown Little Theatre." Steiner nodded. "And since yesterday he's been putting on a swell act. It's taken you in."

McCabe met the deputy's D.A.'s triumphant gaze. "That's no news to me. I learned about the Little Theatre when I was questioning him last night. I checked into it, perhaps farther than you did. All.

he's had is some walk-on parts. Mostly he's been on stage crew. His wife painted scenery."

"So you're not going to book him," Steiner declared.

"I said I haven't made up my mind," McCabe replied.

Steiner pointed his finger. "I'm warning you here and now, chief, I'll give you that little more time, then I'll arrest him if you don't."

Ohler continued to insist he had no knowledge of being the hit-and-run driver who had killed Janie Rankin. McCabe checked the possibility that Ohler might have been disoriented at the wheel. But the family physician, and the insurance company doctor, both declared he was in sound physical shape, and to their knowledge was not taking any drugs, with or without prescription, that would make him dangerous at the wheel.

Further checking revealed that Ohler had not been drinking when he'd left the insurance company office the previous afternoon, nor would he have had time to stop at a bar or tavern on the way home to Valley View. Just that stop at a market to buy a six-pack to take home unopened.

Yet Janie Rankin was dead and there was no escaping that Keith Ohler's car had killed her and no one but Keith Ohler could be placed at the wheel!

Steiner reiterated all that when he came to Valley View again late that afternoon.

"But you still haven't booked him."

John McCabe sighed. "Because I'm still not convinced he's putting on an act of innocence." He listened uncomfortably to Steiner's vehement arguments. When the deputy D. A. paused, McCabe spoke slowly. "And there's another angle I came upon today. I'm waiting to hear from Donovan, one of my regular men, who's checking it out further."

"And just what would that be?" Steiner asked guardedly.

McCabe went on to explain: "I interviewed neighbors of the Rankins in hopes someone might have recalled something overlooked in the excitement yesterday. I learned that a lot of them have been expecting this for a long time, for Janie received absolutely no discipline about running out into the street."

Steiner grimaced impatiently. "You'd better read up on your laws of evidence, chief. That has absolutely no bearing on what happened at two-thirty yesterday afternoon." He waved his arm toward the window.

"You and I could see somebody drive by here at eighty miles an hour. A couple blocks away he's involved in an accident. The point of law is *only* concerned with, not how fast he was going here, but how fast he was going at the scene of the accident. He could have been slowed to fifteen miles an hour."

"I'm familiar with the rules of evidence," McCabe said sharply. "Your superior, the district attorney, has never had occasion to find fault with the evidence in cases I've turned over to him." His gray eyes became cold. "But sometimes, when there's valid proof of past performances — anyway, I'm not turning in this case to the D.A.'s office until I'm convinced the evidence is sufficient."

"I don't need more evidence," Steiner retorted. "I'll obtain a warrant myself for Ohler's arrest. When I get him in court I'll put him behind the wheel of that car—"

"He's already admitted that," McCabe pointed out. "He hasn't tried to hide anything. That's why I—"

Steiner stormed on. "And as for his claims of innocence — I'll bring out that he was driving fast, not the twenty-five miles an hour he claims. But fast because he was hoping to arrive home early to catch his wife with someone else."

McCabe's eyes became icy. "They struck me as a very happy couple, very much in love."

Steiner laughed. "When I tear them apart in court—"

"You'd crucify them for votes?" McCabe demanded.

Steiner glared at him. "Why don't you ask the Rankins how they feel about what happened to their child?"

A few minutes after Steiner left, McCabe's regular patrolman Donovan came in, accompanied by a grim-faced man.

"This is Janie's father, Mr. Rankin, chief."

Donovan gave McCabe a slight nod that he had confirmed with neighbors about Janie's habit of dashing into the street. McCabe, thinking of Steiner's irate remarks about rules of evidence, apologized to Janie's father for asking him to drop in when there were problems at home.

"That's all right, chief," said Rankin, whose dark jaw probably had to be shaved twice a day. He ground big knuckles into a palm. "All the funeral arrangements have been made. If there's anything I can do to help you — well, it might take my mind off other things."

"I appreciate your attitude," McCabe said. "Perhaps I shouldn't ask, but what is your attitude toward Keith Ohler?"

Rankin clenched both hands. "He left my kid to die in the street."

McCabe neither nodded nor shook his head. "Suppose it might be proved that he didn't leave her for dead or dying?"

Rankin's eyes were hot coals burning into McCabe's. "I thought it was proved beyond doubt that he was the driver."

"There's no denying it, from him or from us," said McCabe. He leaned forward from the swivel chair. "Please understand, Mr. Rankin, I'm not trying to make your bad time worse. But there are a few

facts that could stand some clarification. Let's look at it this way. Janie weighs — weighed only thirty pounds. If, dashing out, she saw the car and started to swerve, there might not have been much of an impact, perhaps nothing felt by Ohler at the wheel. Also, she stood only this high."

McCabe held out his hand. "Coming out from in front of a parked car, Mrs. Wetherington's, she might have been so close to Ohler's approaching car she was in his blind spot below the level of the hood and extending a few feet before his car."

Rankin's hands gripped the arms of his chair. "What are you trying to suggest, chief?"

"Also," McCabe went on, "there is no evidence that the wheels of Ohler's car passed over her. So there would have been no jounce. And that, together with no feeling of impact, no sight of her dashing out, might possibly have given Ohler no reason to glance in his mirror to see her lying in the street behind him."

McCabe hesitated. "So there's a chance he could be telling the truth that he had no knowledge of hitting her or leaving the scene of an accident."

Silence, Just the wall clock making scratching sounds. Rankin's fingers tightened and loosened. His white face was troubled.

"If that's so, he's in a hell of a spot, ain't he?"

McCabe nodded. "As a police officer, it's my job to get facts. And it's just as much my duty to get facts to prove innocence as well as guilt. How do you feel about it now, Mr. Rankin?"

"My kid's been killed." His face and hands worked. Then he looked at McCabe. "But if I were caught in a jam like that, I'd sure want a cop like you on the job. Chief, do you really think that Ohler didn't know?"

McCabe didn't answer that. "Keeping in mind what we've just discussed, Mr. Rankin, what about Janie and crossing the street?"

Rankin stared a long time, finally glanced at Donovan, then back to McCabe. "Will this go any farther, chief?"

McCabe restrained his sudden excitement. "I'll be honest with you. I can't promise. I assume you ask if this will be held in confidence because — this has been a problem at home about Janie?"

Again Rankin was silent, then he sighed. "Maybe it will mean, after the funeral, a bust-up between me and—" He lifted his shoulders and let them drop. "I guess it can't make anything worse. We've had plenty of arguments because she, my wife, was too damn busy doing other damn things to give Janie the attention she needed."

"No discipline?" McCabe suggested.

Rankin nodded angrily. "She left that to me. About everything." His

fist pounded his knee. "Always me that had to be the villain to hand out the punishment when I came home from work. Maybe she loved our kid too much to give her some tough treatment, to lay down the law and make it stick about obeying."

Rankin's voice rose and broke. "I loved my kid, too, but I knew you had to sort of forget that sometimes for their own good." Tears started down his face. "Yeah, chief, my kid was always running out into the street."

When Donovan came back from taking Rankin home, he shook his head worriedly. "That's not going to impress Steiner."

"I know," McCabe said heavily. "I just heard via the grapevine he's on his way here again with a warrant for Ohler."

"What are you going to do, Mac?"

"Put my neck on his chopping block." McCabe waved aside Donovan's questions. "Can you do me a favor and stay on for an hour or two of Knapperman's patrol? He's busy doing a little job for me."

Twenty minutes later the deputy D.A. came in with a marshal whose noncommittal expression suggested he wasn't enjoying his job. Steiner slapped a folded legal paper on McCabe's desk.

"You know what that's for. Ohler's not at home. You probably know where he is." McCabe nodded without bothering to unfold the paper. "Where?" Steiner demanded.

"I'll tell you in a moment," said McCabe. "Relax, Steiner. There's still plenty of time before the primary elections." The marshal's lips twitched. McCabe motioned to a chair. "Sit down, Steiner. There's something you'd better know before you scoop up Keith Ohler."

Steiner remained standing over him. "Not that it's going to make any difference, but get it over with."

"All right," said McCabe. "I won't bore you with what I think is sufficient evidence of Ohler's innocence. And I can't stop you from arresting him."

"You're damn right you can't. Where is he?"

"But," McCabe went on, "if you arrest him and bring him to trial, I'll go into that court and lay it out cold why I refused to arrest him. In other words I'll appear as a witness for his defense."

Steiner blew up. "You're a sworn officer of the law."

"Sworn," McCabe snapped, standing up, "to bring the guilty to justice

and to protect the innocent!" He locked eyes with Steiner. "I've never heard of a D.A. who would take a case to court under those circumstances."

"You're looking at one now who will."

"You're a fool, Steiner."

"You're the fool, McCabe. I'll have you busted for this."

"All right." McCabe sighed. "But let me give you a warning. Take it easy when you go to pick up Ohler. We enforce the traffic laws in this town." He picked a slip of paper from his desk. "Ohler's at this address. Want me to show you the way?"

Steiner glanced at the paper. "I know where it is. Come on," he said to the marshal. McCabe, intercepting the marshal at the door, handed him a similar slip. "Better double-check him on the address," he said pointedly.

McCabe followed them closely, smiling grimly when Steiner kept glancing into the mirror. It must have been a trial for the deputy D.A. to hold his speed down to the posted limit. Then McCabe's smile whipped away with a sharp suck of breath when he saw a child flash out from in front of a parked car—right into the path of Steiner's sedan!

A woman screamed. McCabe shrilled his siren and snapped on red flashers as the body appeared from under Steiner's car. Fifteen feet beyond the sprawled figure the deputy D.A.'s tires squalled black skid marks. McCabe ran forward as Steiner and the marshal piled out, staring back. Pausing briefly by the body, McCabe strode forward.

"Mac!" Steiner gasped, pleading. "I never even saw her! I swear—"

Despite his personal feelings, McCabe couldn't dig the knife in deeper and twist it.

"Not her, Steiner. *It!* It's a child-size doll." He gestured toward Knapperman, still crouched before the parked car from where he'd heaved the doll out like a dashing child. "Sorry I had to be melodramatic but I wanted you to see firsthand what Ohler was against and what you'll be against if you take him to court."

The marshal grinned. "Too damned firsthand, Mac. Despite your warning to me on this—" he waved the slip of paper "—despite this I barely glimpsed that doll from where I sat on the right side."

A little later McCabe parked his car outside the home of the Keith Ohlers. The young couple and Mattson, their lawyer, opened the door before he could ring. McCabe immediately answered the question in their eyes.

"Mr. Ohler, it is my duty and pleasure to inform you there will be no action in criminal court on yesterday's occurrence."

"Oh, Keith!" the girl sobbed, hugging her husband. Ohler, blinking, extended his hand to McCabe's and clung to it.

McCabe spoke to Mattson. "I can't vouch that there'll be no civil action from the Rankins, but if I were you—"

The lawyer nodded. "I've already been in touch with Keith's insurance company. An adjuster and I will get right over there with the papers, a release, settlement check and—"

"Lay it all out to the husband," McCabe advised. "I think he'll help you get his wife's necessary signature."

After the lawyer left, John McCabe extended a package to the young couple.

"A couple of steaks," he said, "to replace those that got burned up last night."

The Ohlers invited him to stay and share the meal.

"Not tonight." McCabe smiled. "You've had enough intruders."

Young Mrs. Ohler kissed him. As he walked back to his car his eyes misted, partly from memory of how it had been when his own loving wife was alive, and partly from—well, as a police officer it was a nice feeling for a change to be able to give rather than grab. A damn nice feeling!

In the Next Issue:

Another TRUE CRIME STORY Masterpiece

FRANK NITTI — AL CAPONE'S CAPO KILLER

by DAVID MAZROFF

Whenever the death merchants gathered in Chicago, one name was feared above all — even above Scar-face and his hired men of sudden death. Frank Nitti was his name. He was CAPO, the Boss, the hood who told how and when a man must die — and who would do the killing. Of all Capone's triggermen, Nitti reigned supreme. Here at last is his story — the story no one dared print. Don't miss this great true tale!

RECOIL

Murder stalked the silent forest that day.
Murder—and a man who didn't want to die.

by LARRY KILLIAN

O'HARE JEERED at me for the slowness of my pace. I tried to grin, feeling it was mostly his rage at the bad luck that had dogged us all day. I had shifted my rifle to my other hand and plodded on. He shook his head and snorted and swiftly increased his lead, making for the fence.

He carried his rifle carelessly and I shook my head in turn, a thing he didn't see because the farmer whose land we were approaching popped up just then and bagged O'Hare's attention and mine.

I was too far away to be sure of just what was actually taking place at the moment.

The farmer had tired, so his widow said, of having hunters trample his pastures and shoot his stock. He had fenced up our way so we could not pass.

It was a long way around to our car.

I made out from the pantomime that the farmer was deaf to O'Hare's urging that he let us take a short cut across his property. And I saw O'Hare, in anger or in defiance or

the better to remonstrate, move nearer to the fence.

At that point O'Hare stumbled and the gun went off. The bullet struck the farmer, killing him instantly.

While we waited for the law to come O'Hare cocked his head earnestly and said, "You saw me stumble, didn't you, Ken? You can swear it was accidental."

Now to tell you the truth I didn't know. It seemed to me as I tried to restage the happening in my mind that O'Hare stumbled not before the firing of the shot but after.

As I have said, I could not be sure of just what took place. The distance was great. The timing was close. It could have been either way.

But I recoiled from the thought that O'Hare had taken deliberate aim, that he had taken human life as lightly as either of us would have taken the life of a lower animal. It was as though the world had turned turtle.

So I testified that I had seen O'Hare stumble and then had heard the shot.

But I had hesitated too long before I answered O'Hare. I could see that in his eyes every time our glances met.

You might think that a thing of this nature would drive us apart, that each of us, knowing that the body of the farmer would always cast its shadow of doubt between us, would hunt excuses not to face the other.

Not so. I cleaved to O'Hare like an embodiment of his conscience.

If you have ever done something of the sort you know that the worst part of the job is this: you never know just why you take it on yourself, unless it is to expiate some guilt of your own.

Why on his part O'Hare wanted to maintain our hunting companionship I of course can't say. Perhaps O'Hare himself could not say. But I will hazard that there burned in him a need to outface suspicion, to reproach reproach, just or unjust.

The upshot of it was, we went on hunting trips year after year. And always our eyes lay in ambush, to trap a sign of guilt on the one hand or of knowledge of guilt on the other.

There can be no greater bore than conscience, particularly to conscience itself. But though wearying of the load I kept on.

I often thought I felt the eyes of O'Hare searing me. But when I looked I always found him grinning. Grinning ambiguously, though.

And then came last fall.

I was cursing the leaf mold clogging my steps. I had to keep moving to come up with O'Hare, who had far outpaced me. I heard a shot.

It seemed to me that it had been far to my left, where I knew there were other hunters. But sounds are tricky, hard to pin down, especially in the woods. It could just as easily

have been ahead of me, and that would make it O'Hare's. He had most likely reached the waterhole by now and for all I knew had just got himself a fine buck.

I cursed the leaf mold again. Still walking, I snapped off a twig and bent to scrape my boots.

I heard another shot, this one nearer. Too near. I heard it only after it crashed through the space my head had occupied.

I pitched forward, flattened myself.

I heard crackling of brush. The sounds seemed to be dying away but I lay still, silently blessing the leaf mold muzzling my breathing. I remained so a full minute.

Then carefully, slowly and soundlessly as I could, I snaked, rifle in elbow crooks, to the shelter of a boulder. I glanced at my watch. 9:10. I gave myself five minutes, then making conscious use of my woodcraft I made my way silently around to the waterhole.

Plunging straight through I would have made it in two or three minutes. The way I did it took fifteen.

O'Hare was sitting on a stump at the edge of the waterhole, his back to me, holding his rifle loosely, gazing out across the water.

Trees gently clashed antlers, shadows lightened and deepened on the pond, a dusty-looking dull yellow-green mud turtle sunned itself on a log floating in the middle of the pond.

I stared at O'Hare's back. That made the second shot either the other hunter's or O'Hare's.

On balance, O'Hare would seem innocent. He sat there innocently enough and nearby a shell glinted,

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careless evidence that the first shot had been O'Hare's.

Of course O'Hare could have picked up the ejected shell from his place of ambush and carried it to place it just here.

I could bolt. The ramrod conscience could turn and run and never know, never want to know, the truth.

I took in the peaceful world, the mud turtle sunning, the tree gently clashing antlers, the shadows deepening and lightening on the pond. I glanced at my watch. 9:33. Twenty minutes ago I could have died and the world would have gone on just the same. It would be just as peaceful here now. The trees would engage in their soft mock battle, the turtle would drowse on the log, the shadows would shift in value.

It couldn't have been O'Hare. Looking at him sitting there so serenely, I couldn't believe that only twenty minutes ago he had tried to take my life.

If I was right, it was an accident. Some fool of a hunter was cursing his luck that he had lost a deer.

If I was wrong, I would never know. O'Hare would not miss another time.

I took a step forward.

The moist soil sucked at my feet. The turtle opened an eye.

O'Hare started to turn. He said quietly, "Ken? What the hell took you so long?" He grinned. "Just as well you weren't here about twenty minutes ago. You wouldn't seen me miss a big buck."

I stopped short, took a half step back, and brought my rifle up.

I said, "Don't move."

He sat still but his head kept turning slowly.

"I'll be go to hell," he said. "What's got into you, Ken?"

I said, "Throw your rifle in the pond."

He eased his body around a bit and behind the cover of his bulk I could sense the barrel of his rifle inching toward me.

His brow wrinkled. "You gone mad?"

Then he moved so fast he nearly froze me in surprise.

His bullet missed.

Mine scored.

The turtle dove into the pond.

I knelt beside O'Hare. I answered his eyes. "You didn't shoot from here twenty minutes ago. You certainly must have left this spot," I said. "That mud turtle was dry. Nothing had alarmed it for at least a half hour."

O'Hare was trying to say something.

I strained to listen through the trees gently clashing antlers.

"Go'el."

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